my only constant is you

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by TheSilverQueen

Summary

Hannibal Lecter is an immortal who can never die. Will Graham is a time traveler who can never stay in one place. Perhaps that is why they are perfect for each other.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Prologue

Chapter Summary

We start, of course, at the beginning, that strange and wondrous place in space.

Chapter Notes

Firstly, all my love to the mods behind the Murder Husbands Big Bang for bringing us all together for this amazing event. Please check out the rest of the works at the Murder Husbands Big Bang Tumblr or the AO3 collection above.

Secondly, I was lucky enough to be chosen by mferret. She was kind and supportive and her art is GORGEOUS, go see it HERE.

Lastly, thank you so much to all my friends, who cheered me on, propped me up, and otherwise were amazing human beings. Special thank you to my dear (aka Max because this story was originally a 5k thing for #SummertimeSlick. It, uh, got out of control. Originally it was based upon this fic idea.

"Hello," says a little boy.

The other little boy blinks. "Hello," he replies.

The first little boy scuffs his heels in the dirt. It is very strange dirt, for each scuff kicks up dust that glitters and gleams in the air around them. "What's your name?"

"I am called Hannibal," the boy says. "Who are you?"

"Will. Do you know where we are?"

Hannibal shrugs. "I woke up here."

"Me too." Will looks up, but all he can is an endless whorl of stars. They can't be stars, though, because they are all moving, and Will's pretty certain no meteor shower involves every single star in the heavens. "I'm hungry."

Hannibal points at a single golden tree in the distance. There are strange orbs on it. "Food," he says.

The fruit of the golden tree is stranger than the dirt. Although they are bigger than Hannibal and Will's hands combined, they feel as light and insubstantial as a feather, and each section tastes as sweet as the sweetest fruit, for all that they look like petals. When they have eaten all the sections, all that is left behind is a single gleaming seed. It pulses in their hands, whispering words neither can understand, but they are so hungry that they pry it apart and eat it too. Bellies sated, they curl up in the shade of the golden tree and doze off, soothed by the oldest melodies in existence.

My beautiful children, says the flower. *My first and my last. Your road will be harsh and long and painful, but one day you will stand before me again as one mind, one heart, one soul. That day, we will welcome you home.*

When Will Meets Hannibal

Chapter Notes

> Obvious nods to Doctor Who here. Throughout the entire fic, but there are some really direct callbacks here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Will time travels, he is six years old and supposed to be walking into kindergarten. Instead he walks into the bathroom, tears streaming from his eyes after discovering someone has stolen his snacks, and when he closes the door in front of him and goes to sit down on the toilet he instead falls onto soft ground.

When he looks up, he is nowhere near the school.

In fact, judging by his surroundings, he is nowhere near Louisiana either. The air smells strange; it feels drier and softer, devoid of the bite of wave-driven winds. Granted, this could be because Will is currently surrounded by a ring of bushes, but Will doesn't think so. Something is different and Will knows it down to the marrow of his bones, even if he can't quite say why.

That is when a shiny pair of shoes comes to a stop in front of him, and a man says, "Hello, Will."

The man wears a three piece suit, the kind of finery Will's only ever seen in politicians and door-to-door salesman. He has an umbrella in one hand and a basket draped over the arm of the other. He looks wholly unsurprised to see a six-year-old child crouched in the bushes, and that alone makes Will nervous. He's not very good at socialization yet, but he is good at faces – in his own way, anyways. He can't quite always put names to faces, but he remembers each and every one for the mask they wear and the secrets that glimmer underneath.

He has never seen this man before in his life.

The man crouches down, fingers splayed like Will is a wild animal that needs convincing he means no harm. "Your name is Will, isn't it?"

He is *teasing*, for some reason. His body language is open and relaxed, like he actually knows Will, and when Will risks a glimpse into his eyes, there is no lie there and no hesitation. For whatever reason, he thinks he knows Will.

It takes him three tries to reply. Will isn't very good with words. "Yes," he squeaks out finally.

The man nods slowly, but there is no surprise. “Hello, Will,” he repeats, but softer, gentler, less like a man befriending a wild animal and more like a man welcoming a recently lost stray back to the fold. “Are you hungry?”

As if on cue, Will’s stomach rumbles, speaking for what Will’s tongue cannot bring itself to express. Will feels his face heat up, but the man simply smiles and settles himself neatly on the grass, like he befriends random six year old children lost in bushes all the time and offers them meals.

Which, to be fair, maybe he does.

“Are you a stranger?” he asks, because his da always taught him to be polite.

The man’s teeth flash as he laughs. Will’s seen the same in the wild dogs that prowl on the edges of streets, wary and wiry and nearly rabid about defending their territory. “What an odd question. Why do you ask?”

“Stranger danger,” Will says, because duh.

“Am I a stranger if I know your name?”

“Maybe you can read minds.”

For some reason, this amuses the man greatly. He doesn’t laugh again, but Will is starting to be able to make out the cracks in his mask; he can read the way the man’s lips twitch and the way his chin dips and the way he rolls his shoulders. Perhaps this is not the first time this man has been accused of being a mind reader.

“Unfortunately, this is one skill I do not possess,” the man says eventually. “But rest assured, Will: I am no stranger to you, and especially not now.”

There is no lie in the man’s face. He believes he knows Will as surely as he believes that the sky is blue or the grass is green. It is strange, to think that someone has decided it was worth the effort to know Will, because if he truly does not, then why bother with the elaborate layout, but if he does, if he does and Will does not know him, then, well . . . Will *did* end up in a garden of bushes far away from his school bathroom.

“How long have we been not-strangers, then?”

The man frowns in consideration, but Will cannot see any numbers ticking in the back of his eyes. Whatever he’s thinking about, he’s not counting dates. “A long time for me,” he replies eventually, “perhaps a far shorter time for you.”

Will thinks it over, chewing thoughtfully on the egg and cheese sandwich the man hands him. It is warm and seasoned to perfection, and to his joy the man produces a second without prompting the moment he realizes Will is staring longingly at the crumbs on his hands. It takes a third devoured sandwich before he notices that the man is just watching him, his head tilted just so, instead of eating with him like any normal person would.

He brushes at the crumbs. “I’m a growing boy,” he says defensively, because it’s what his da says when his ma looks askance at the way he demolishes food.

“So was I once,” the man notes. “It is of no surprise to me.”

“So . . . why are you staring at me?”

“I was wondering if you knew who I was yet. Sometimes it takes a bit for the disorientation to settle.”

Will blinks. “But I’ve never met you.”

The man doesn’t flinch or blink or otherwise move, but his body radiates pure shock to Will’s finely tuned senses. He might as well be pale as a sheet, so dramatic is his reaction to Will’s five simple words. “Never?” he whispers.

“Nope.”

“Ah . . . How rude of me, then.” The man clears his throat and shuffles a bit, almost like he’s nervous, and it makes Will want to grin. “My name is Hannibal Lecter.”

Will wrinkles his nose. He hates formal names with a burning passion; there’s a reason he tells everyone to call him Will and despises times when he is instead referred to by his full name. “I don’t like it.”

“My name?”

“It’s so . . . formal.”

“Ah, but I am very formal indeed,” Hannibal says. “So the name suits me.”

“I still don’t like it.”

Hannibal’s smile deepens, but it’s a small, private thing, like he’s sharing a private joke that Will has no idea how to receive. “How interesting, given that it was you who first gave it to me.”

“When?”

“Oh, I suppose you’ll get around to it eventually,” Hannibal remarks, tidying their little picnic with swift, economical movements. “You always did say that everything happens in its own time, although I used to think that was because you knew saying such a thing irritated me beyond belief.”

The words make a strange flutter begin in Will’s stomach, not unlike the swooping sensation when leaping from the top of a swing to soar, however briefly, before gravity calls one back to the earth. It is exhilarating and indescribable, but Will feels an intense sorrow because he knows, deep down, that soon it will end, that gravity will reassert her power, that time will regain mastery over him.

“Everything happens in its own time,” Will repeats thoughtfully.

Hannibal nods. “You taught me that, once upon a time. I wonder, perhaps, if it was because I knew it was a lesson I would need to learn, and I would accept it from no other teacher than the best.”

Hannibal is not making any sense. Will scowls. Tasty sandwiches or not, Will *despises* being tricked. “You’re an adult.”

“And?”

“Adults teach children.”

“Only when they are too blind to see the lessons children teach better than adults,” Hannibal says quietly, and there is sadness there, overwhelming and overpowering, so much so that Will blinks away tears before he even registers why he is sad. “You taught me that too, my dear, once upon a time, and great was my sorrow for ignoring you.”

Will shuffles a few inches forward, until their knees brush. He doesn’t like a sad Hannibal anymore than he likes a formal one. “Don’t be sad,” he says uselessly. “I don’t like it when you’re sad.”

“It’s all right. That was a long time ago.”

Then Hannibal does something very strange – he leans forward, touches their foreheads together, and closes his eyes.

“It’s all right, Will,” Hannibal murmurs. “Go ahead; I can see time beginning to pull you again. I will be waiting for you always.

“Find me,” Hannibal says, “in your future.”

And a brilliant spot blooms in Will’s mind, like a flower whose seed he hadn’t even known he was carrying bursting through the final layer of soil to soak up the sun and spread its petals, and it is beautiful and glorious and he gasps from the sheer wonder of its existence in his lonely, lonely life.

Will opens his eyes, and for one moment, just one moment, he hears *And I name you Hannibal, because – come on, it’s hilarious, you’re totally smiling – because it rhymes with –*

Then he blinks, and he is alone in a dark and smelly school toilet again, with only the fading crumbs to reassure him of his sanity.

Well, the crumbs – and the beautiful flower still blossoming in his mind.

The next time Will meets Hannibal, he’s climbing wearily into bed and praying for sleep to take him quickly. The sickness that makes his nose drip and his head ache hasn’t gone away like the doctor promised, and they can’t afford any more medication; Will knows without being told that he is going to have to suffer it out until his body finally recovers.

When he opens his eyes, though, he is no longer in his tiny rundown bed.

Now he is tucked into the center of a massive bed, so large that "bed" really isn't the right word for it. "Nest" might be better, honestly, given the mattress takes up almost the entire room and is lined with pillows, blankets, little glowing orbs, and some gleaming panels at the edges. It looks like a scene out of a movie or a dream, except that when Will bites himself, the pain is real, and when he counts his fingers, he possesses the correct number.

Will takes a deep breath, and yes, the air is strange again. Wetter, this time, but without being overwhelming.

"Will, you're awake."

This time Will does not shy away or flinch. The flower blossoming in the back of his mind arches towards Hannibal like petals reaching for the sun, and Will just hugs the nearest pillow closer to himself and blinks in surprise at Hannibal as the man approaches.

And what a shock it is. Hannibal isn't wearing a three piece suit anymore; he's instead wearing some sort of sleek, all black uniform that covers him from toes to neck without any kind of break or seam. The only spot of color is a strange triangle on his chest, with points colored in red and blue and gold, like some kind of medal.

"What are you wearing?" Will blurts out.

"Clothes, my dear," Hannibal says, sounding faintly amused. "Yours are being washed, by the way, and will be returned to you shortly. I'm afraid it took some convincing to ensure they were not spaced."

" . . . Spaced?"

Hannibal looks at him. There's a crease on his forehead, like he wants to frown but thinks it would be undignified. "You've been in space before, Will, haven't you?"

"I just went to sleep and woke up here," Will says helplessly. "I don't even know where here is."

"Ah." Hannibal brushes one of the gleaming panels. "Transparent mode, please."

Then the walls just *disappear* and Will shrieks and jumps so high he's almost sure his feet leave the bed entirely because *there are stars outside*. Faint, glowing pinpricks, mostly, but it's even better than the time that they went to the astronomy museum and the whole ceiling light up with a picture of the Milky Way. Will thinks he can even see part of the Milky Way in the distance, long curling spirals of gleaming light.

"It's not."

"Not what?"

Hannibal settles next to him. His uniform might no longer be a three piece suit, but his posture is as formal as ever. "It's not the Milky Way," he repeats. "It is another spiral galaxy,

but we are a very, very long way away from Earth. The Explorers called this one ‘Fish and Chips’, but that is only a translation so it is possible that it has a more accurate name.”

Will then interrupts the lecture with a coughing fit. He completely doesn’t mean to, but he’s been so focused on listening to Hannibal that he slipped on holding back the cough, so now he wheezes for breath as Hannibal reaches out with worried fingers.

“Will?”

Will wipes furiously at his streaming nose. “Sorry,” he says miserably. “Sick.”

Hannibal touches his forehead with the back of his palm, like the school nurse does, and then he carefully rubs underneath Will’s jaw and pats gently down his arms and legs. Will normally would be nervous – he hates being touched by strangers – but when Hannibal’s skin meets his, Will only feels the blooming light of the flower in his mind, safe and familiar yet wholly new, and he relaxes without even thinking about it.

“You definitely have a fever,” Hannibal pronounces. “Aches and pains too, I imagine, in addition to the coughing and the runny nose. Any purple lumps or green rashes?”

Will blinks. “Any purple what?”

Hannibal’s shoulders twitch, ever so slightly. Will asked the question completely innocently, but he knows immediately that Hannibal hates being mocked, so he pats clumsily at Hannibal’s knee and hopes that conveys the message.

Thankfully, it seems to work. “You had an episode with Martian space flu around this age,” Hannibal explains matter-of-factly. “I don’t know exactly when, since you didn’t know exactly when, and I do think you were a little older but I didn’t think it would hurt to check. It would require a great deal more care than I think you have time for right now.”

This time, Will’s pretty sure the world spinning around him has a lot less to do with his cold and a lot more to do with the craziness emanating from Hannibal’s mouth.

The craziest part of all, of course, is that Will knows Hannibal isn’t lying.

Somehow.

“I think it’s just a common cold,” Will says slowly. “From, you know. Earth.”

Hannibal smiles at him. “Which Earth?” he asks, and once again it is so completely genuine that Will just stares blankly at him.

“Ah,” Hannibal says after a moment. He rises and strides over to the wall, tapping rapidly into a glowing orange panel and swiping through options so quickly Will can’t even begin to guess what they are. “Earth Prime then. Early days yet for you, I imagine. Have we done Mars yet?”

“Hannibal,” Will says, “I don’t . . . I don’t even think you can travel to Mars.”

Hannibal slows. Stops.

“Very early days then,” Hannibal murmurs, almost to himself. The panel makes a low whirring sound and a little vial materializes in the space below. It’s filled with some strange blue liquid, and Hannibal examines it briefly before apparently deciding it passes muster and walks it back over. “How about Olympus then? The Elysian Hotel? The Greatest Fish Game Market in Bellanome?”

Will just shakes his head numbly.

“Will,” Hannibal says, and this time when he grips Will’s arms, the flower radiates unease and sadness. “Will, please tell me you know who I am.”

Will doesn’t answer this time. He knows without question that he doesn’t need to.

Hannibal releases him as if his hands have been burnt. It’s not violent or anything, more like the slow slide of devastation when the secure grip you thought you had fails and you tumble head over heels into darkness. It’s devastation and shock, writ clear across Hannibal’s face, and Will almost wants to touch it because no face so beautiful should be so sad.

Hannibal made Will a picnic and made a flower bloom in his mind. He shouldn’t be sad.

Will reaches out and places his hand on Hannibal’s shoulder. The man is so tense Will thinks he’d have an easier time moving a mountain. “So tell me,” Will invites. “Tell me who you are.”

“I don’t know if that’s wise. It might . . . change things.”

“I told you,” Will points out, because if Hannibal knows Will, then Will must have told him. Will isn’t exactly the soul-bearing type when it comes to strangers. “I must have, because you know me.”

Hannibal laughs, but it’s sharp and bitter, like an ice cube clattering to the bottom of a class. It’s lonely and sad, the herald of better things to come but bereft of the actual elements of change. “Do you know,” Hannibal says, “I don’t think you ever actually told me who you were. I found all of it out for myself, piece by piece, petal by petal, time by time. You were the most beautiful enigma I had ever seen, and I told myself only I would ever know you.”

Will considers his streaming nose and red eyes and thinks that beauty must be in the eye of the beholder.

“I’m just . . . me,” Will says helplessly.

“And what a wonderful creature you are,” Hannibal says, and his smile is still so sad that it makes Will’s heart ache deep inside.

So Will gives in. He reaches out and touches that beautiful, alien face and he brings it close to his own human one, and the moment their foreheads touch he feels the flower bloom a little more. It grows a little taller, it forms another little bud, and its roots sink deeper into the winding recesses of his mind, and from the way Hannibal shudders quietly and presses closer

he imagines it must be the same for this strange man who's so devoted to him even though Will barely knows him.

Hannibal sighs. "Time is calling you again, Will."

And sure enough, Will is definitely feeling that gut-deep sense of dizziness even though he hasn't moved an inch. "How do you know?"

"You pulled me with you, once," Hannibal explains. "You saved my life. I don't think there's any harm in telling you that. Without you, I wouldn't be here; I'd be scattered across the void in a million particles. But now I know what it feels like to move like you do, so: find me in the future, Will. I'll always be here for you."

When Will opens his eyes again, he's alone, and his cold is gone.

The third time Will time travels, he is seven years old and crying again in a school bathroom. He's not quite the social butterfly that would make him run around and spread stories of the man who'd helped him and made a flower bloom in his mind, but he did tell his ma and his da and when the school assignment was to draw his family he'd drawn Hannibal in the garden.

He had not quite expected the amount of ridicule he would receive.

Unfortunately for him, despite his teacher's objections, his drawing had gone up with all the others and he's had no end of teasing from his fellow classmates.

So, Will is back to where he started: crying in a bathroom.

When there is a polite knock on the door, Will just snarls low in his throat. He has no desire for company or fake smiles from the teacher or anything at all. He just wants to some quiet and peace to let the sadness that is slowly drowning his heart drain out through his eyes, and then, maybe, he'll have the strength to make his limbs cooperate and brave the terrifyingly cruel world once more.

"Will," says the person on the other side.

"Go away!"

"Dearest," the man says, sounding very amused, "I do need to use the facilities and I'm afraid you're in the only one."

Will sniffles and scrapes at his eyes. It is true that the school's bathrooms are gross and Will had chosen this stall to avoid the nasty mess in the others, but still. "I don't care."

The man sighs. "You always were stubborn. How did you get inside anyways? This lock is coded to my handprint alone."

Will looks up in his confusion, but his "what" is strangled in his throat because . . . well, because he's no longer in the school bathroom. The stall is less of a stall and more of a full

sized, decked out *room*, complete with a gleaming shower stall in the far corner and a Jacuzzi in the other and a desk with mirrors. And, of course, the toilet Will is sitting on, which is now edged with gold and purple and has a million button options on the top and even padded armrests.

Will blinks, scrapes at his eyes again, and then looks again.

Yep, still a decked out bathroom.

Which means . . . "Hannibal?" Will asks tentatively. He prays that it is Hannibal, because if it's not, then Will's just going crazy.

"Yes, dearest," Hannibal says. "Will you deign to let me in now?"

Will hops off the toilet, except he's slightly distracted when it happily chirps "Have a pleasant day!" and flushes itself. In his shock he walks straight into the desk, which swivels to accept him, and menus start opening on the mirrors with options like "News" and "Orders" and a whole bunch of other words that make Will's head spin.

"Um how . . . how do I do that?"

Hannibal sighs. "Door override, please, on the authority of General Hannibal Lecter of the Seventh Exploratory Fleet, access code 159734862."

The door flashes brightly and then smoothly retracts into the wall. If Will hadn't seen it happen, he never might have believed that a door had even existed in the first place. Of course, all thoughts of the door are driven out by the sight of Hannibal, standing in the doorway with a faint smirk on his mouth and arms crossed casually against his chest. He looks exactly as Will remembers him: strong jaw, broad shoulders, long legs, piercing eyes. The only difference is the uniform; instead of all-black with a multi-colored pin, now he's dressed in bright, snazzy blues and reds and his breast pocket is marked by a series of stars in different colors. He even has a brilliant blue bracelet on his wrist and a delicate blue circle around his ear.

"You look different," Will blurts out, even as Hannibal draws near.

Hannibal doesn't even hesitate. "I probably do. I've recently changed Fleets, after all. Besides, depending where you are in my life, well."

It's astounding, how calm Hannibal is that a random human child is just dropping in on his life at random points. Will wonders just how long Hannibal has known him – and, perhaps, just how long it took him to accept the fact that Will never stays long enough for any meaningful conversation.

"So which Fleet wears black?" Will asks.

"None. At least, no human ones," Hannibal concedes. "I suppose I'll have to keep an eye out now. How old are you, Will?"

"How old are you?"

Hannibal smiles, like he isn't annoyed at all, which is definitely weird. Most adults hate it when Will does that kind of thing. Granted, Will generally picks more intrusive questions, and he can tell that age is not exactly an offensive topic for Hannibal, but it's still a little strange.

"How are we defining age?" Hannibal asks cheerfully. He looks Will up and down, as if checking for injury, and then he sits down and somehow manages to at once slump into the cushions of the couch while simultaneously retaining that military iron-straight spine. "Humans generally count by rotations of the earth and sun, but the Xae go by meteor showers and the Polas go by number of monarchs."

Will wrinkles his nose. Textbook adult avoidance. "We're both human, so how about human age?"

"Never assume anything," Hannibal says languidly. "First lesson you ever taught me. Appearances can be deceiving, Will; whatever gave you the impression that either of us were human?"

Will opens his mouth – and then abruptly closes it. Hannibal has a very good point. Will is apparently jumping from school toilets to spaceships, and Hannibal hasn't aged even the tiniest bit despite going from Earth to . . . wherever in space they are, and Will's pretty sure that at home even getting to the moon is a major struggle.

Still . . .

"Well, I'm human. Are you . . . not? Because that's okay," Will says hastily, "as long as you're not gonna, I don't know, invade."

Hannibal laughs like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. "Invasion," he repeats in amusement. "Don't worry, Will, the Earth will never be invaded by me. Humans have been conquering every piece of new land they discover for a thousand years; I promise it won't be any different in space."

Then he leans down and presses their foreheads together, and everything about aliens slides right out of Will's mind because this – this feels like coming home again, just Hannibal and Will and the flower blooming steadily between their minds.

This time, when time begins to pull Will away, he makes sure he's the one to stare straight into Hannibal's eyes and says, "I'll find you in the future."

The joy on Hannibal's face is worth the dizziness.

Of course, it's not like Will actually has any control over his abilities. At all. If they are even abilities and not a curse or a portal that's attached itself to Will or a vengeful god-level creature.

This is why the next time Will time travels, it is exactly ten days later by his time and apparently about ten centuries by Hannibal's time.

Ten centuries backwards.

Hannibal is dressed in what looks like the skin of some furry creature in the cat family, carrying a very sharp pointed stick, and has a very startled expression on his face. He doesn't exactly attack Will, but it does take him a very long moment to put said pointed stick down and he definitely doesn't greet Will with the mix of relief-longing-adoration that Hannibal usually does.

" . . . Hi?" Will ventures.

He reaches for Hannibal's head, making grabby hands because he still hasn't hit his growth spurt, and is not at all ready for Hannibal to snarl deep in his throat and jerk backwards out of reach.

"Don't touch me," Hannibal spits, eyes red with anger.

Will blinks. "But we always – "

"*We* do nothing. You just – " Hannibal tilts his head. "Wait. Humans grow larger with age, yes?"

Will thinks back to Hannibal laughing off questions of being an alien and resolves to smack future-Hannibal very, very hard the next time they meet. "Yeah. I mean. The kind I am does anyways."

"You're the only kind I know," Hannibal mutters, and wow, there is a whole bunch of dark feelings there. "Are you – do you remember the hunt of the full moon?"

"You said you weren't a werewolf," Will says immediately, taking a step back. "If you lied to me . . ."

"I never said that."

Hannibal looks so offended by the accusation that Will almost wants to laugh. Except, you know, he's pretty sure this Hannibal would stab him the second his laugh made it out of his mouth. Hannibal has always exuded violence, but Will's never been afraid of him; Hannibal's violence isn't the flashy, short-lived drama of carnivores ripping into flesh, but the deeper, intimate kind, the kind that makes people walk down hallways with all the lights turned on and peering around corners and keeping their backs to the wall. It's the fear of ages past, communicated without word or gesture, just a presence that makes people cower without even knowing why. It's the scent of an apex predator, swift and silent, and Will has always wanted to roll it up and stitch it into a blanket to keep him warm at night.

Thankfully, that violence is fading away from Hannibal now. He's looking at Will more like a snack than a meal.

"You are a child," he remarks. "So. You don't really know the whole story, do you?"

"No, because you're really close-mouthed." If he's asked Hannibal once about the story between them, he's asked a thousand times.

“Am I? You used to say I was too mouthy.” Hannibal sinks down to the floor and crosses his legs elegantly, as poised in a fur skin with dirt smeared on his face as he is in a three piece suit with a gold edged bathroom. “Come here, Will. I want to get a closer look at you. I’ve never seen you so young before, I think.”

“You think?” Will repeats, edging closer.

Hannibal hums. “My early memories of you are not . . . so clear. I was very ill, back then.”

At least this time, Hannibal lets him bring their foreheads together, and they both relax when the flower in their minds blooms to life again, brilliant and familiar. Hannibal’s petals are flavored with bitterness and regret, like a tea left steeping too long, and Will thinks that if he could just hold on a little longer, he could identify the name behind it – but Hannibal is drawing back, so Will lets him go.

They watch the sun sink below the horizon together, and for a long while there is nothing but the gentle sound of fur against skin as Hannibal breathes in and out, like meditation.

Finally, Hannibal shakes himself like a lion after a nap and rumbles, “You explained this to me, once upon a time. You are a time traveler, and you cannot control when you leave or where you land. The first time I met you, you were a man grown. You . . . saved me. You never said when you had first met me, although I assume I too was older. We don’t know what I am, except that I am always here, no matter where you go. Sometimes you find me and sometimes you do not. But we are connected, always.”

Bitterness and regret. Will rolls the flavors through his mouth and tests the waters. “Do you . . . not want to be connected?”

Hannibal shrugs. “You are all I have ever known.”

“I don’t . . . I don’t think I could break the connection,” Will says. “You, uh. You made it. For me.”

Something in that stumbling mess cracks the giant mountain façade that Hannibal is. He turns to Will, and for the first time, Will glimpses a tiny hint of the longing he has grown used to. “I connected us? I sought you out?”

“With a picnic basket,” Will confirms. “You gave me food. Lots of food.”

“Then perhaps there is always hope.”

The sun is so bright now, as its final rays cross the horizon, that Will can’t see Hannibal’s face. But he can feel the way Hannibal softens against him and pulls the fur skin closer to them, like a blanket against the cold wind, and he can hear Hannibal’s tone, wistful like he’s convincing himself. He won’t push, though. Clearly something has happened, and maybe, if Will’s lucky, he’ll be able to avert it since he knows it’s coming. So he moves onto a safer topic.

“If you’ve met me before, do you know when I’ll see you again?”

Hannibal shakes his head. “You have no control,” he repeats. “For you, time is not a straight line where everything has happened in a set way and the past is your constant. Time is the only constant you have. Tomorrow you might jump into my past, and I will remember it as clearly as I see you now – but you also might jump into my future, and I will remember now as clearly as I see you then.”

“Oh.” Will thinks about this, and Hannibal’s got a point. Time means different things for them. “I guess my life won’t be boring.”

Hannibal leans down and lets their foreheads touch one more time. “No, Will,” he says softly, “it never will be.”

Then he clears his throat. “So. Lesson one: try not to spoil the future.”

Will waits anxiously over the next few days for his next jump, now that he’s armed with Hannibal’s many lectures on what to do and what not to do. He sticks to sensible clothing and hides snacks in his pockets. He sticks to himself as much as possible to avoid questions. He even starts doing his homework in advance, so he can spend more time sleeping off the jet-lag of jumping through time.

Of course, now that he knows for certain he is a time-traveler and really wants to time-travel . . . nothing happens.

At the three week mark, he starts a journal, so he won’t forget anything.

At the three month mark, he abandons the journal, mostly because it’s getting more frustrating than sad to realize the cumulative worth of his time with Hannibal can hardly fill up a dozen pages.

At the three year mark, he resigns himself to the idea that maybe he’ll never jump again.

Will is thirteen years old when he time travel again. It has been six years since he burnt the journal containing all of his memories, four years since he stopped peering at the faces of elegant European men, and two years since he gave up altogether. There are no other stories of time travelers on Earth, no alien invasions, and no results for “Hannibal Lecter” in Google.

Well. No results that make sense anyways.

So to say Will thinks he is dreaming when he takes his first step into his first class and meets squishy ground instead of hard concrete is an understatement.

“Not cool,” Will mutters, shifting his weight and attempting to regain his balance. “Why is it always me . . .”

Then Will looks up, sees the massive sprawling swamp he’s apparently just stumbled into, and his mind goes blank. It makes no sense – it’s homeroom English, not college level botany, and there aren’t exactly any swamps nearby and, well.

There's a man sitting cross-legged on a rock in the middle of said swamp, and Will knows that face.

His first attempt at speaking dies in his throat, starved for moisture. His second attempt turns into a coughing fit when he takes an enormous breath and gags on the sudden increase in humidity. And there isn't any need for a third attempt, because his coughs echo like mad, and the man is turning around immediately and –

"Will," Hannibal says, and it *is* him, his elegant face, his neat clothing, his pure and obvious joy.

"Hannibal," Will says, "Hannibal, you're – you're real?"

Hannibal gives him a look that expresses both his supreme annoyance and his joy to be close to Will again. It's like the whiplash of a sudden car stop, the realization that he isn't crazy or dreaming, and therefore when Hannibal finishes hopping throughout the rocks in the swamp to reach him with two hands extended, Will reaches right back and lets their foreheads press together. The flower blooms again, and this time they both breathe a sigh of relief.

"I have missed you," Hannibal murmurs, and his petals taste like lemon peels, so sharp it almost burns but searing through his mind like a palate cleanser. "How long has it been?"

"Six years, for me. You?"

"Two months. You said my mountain top retreat was too . . . 'creepy' so I relocated. I hope this is a suitable change."

Lesson two: if the future is spoiled, listen and learn.

It has been six years since Will learned Hannibal's lessons, but he'll never forget them. So Will just grins and makes a show of glancing around. "Well, the humidity's a bit much and I don't really care for all this mist, but yeah, it's definitely a lot less 'serial killer in the woods hideout' than the mountain top."

For some reason, that makes Hannibal laugh. "I'll take your word for it. Come. I have food and I imagine you are hungry."

And, well, lesson three was to find food and water to replenish the energy burned in the time jump, so Will jumps gladly into the offered piggyback ride and lets Hannibal run them over to his new little hideout. Hannibal explains how his new living place came about and his new daily routine, and Will mostly just sits back and revels in the thrill of knowing that time can't keep Hannibal and him apart forever.

They feast on fish and vegetables for lunch, and afterwards Hannibal drags him outside and starts teaching him how to read animal tracks in the mud.

Apparently at some point in Hannibal's past, Will expressed an interest in learning to hunt. Go figure.

He gets twelve hours with Hannibal, the longest he's ever had, and by the time he feels time beginning to pull him away again, he's so tired that he can only grin and hug Hannibal a little tighter when Hannibal bids him good-bye.

"I hope it isn't six years again," Will says.

"Well, I suppose we'll find out."

A week later, Will hops off his porch and nearly trips down a mountain top.

Hannibal grabs him, because of course he does, and then he drags Will back to his house on a hill. Even in the house is more like a creepy little shack and the hill is more like a giant mountain with trees. So many trees.

"Wow, the serial killer in the woods factor just went way up," Will says immediately.

Hannibal gives him the side-eye from where he's digging out cloth to use as bandages while simultaneously boiling some water and setting the table, because of course he's a great multi-tasker. "I shall take your housing advice under consideration," he says dryly. "No doubt it's of equal weight to your first aid skills."

Will blatantly lifts his arms and checks them. Yeah, he's bleeding, but it's not life-threatening. "I said I was fine, and I'm right! I won't die."

"Of bleeding? Probably not. But infection is an entirely different story."

"What are you, a doctor?"

Hannibal sets the steaming bowl of water on the table and raises Will's scraped arms towards the light with a critical eye. "In another life, yes. One of the best, actually."

"Cool," Will says cheerfully. "Also, ouch."

"Heat is necessary to ensure – "

"Just kidding."

Hannibal smoothes down the bandage. There's a worried little line in his forehead that Will really wants to poke, and it hasn't gone away even though they've already down their standard hello. Will kicks him gently in the legs.

"Seriously, I'm fine. You caught me."

" . . . I don't like to see you in pain," Hannibal says, as though the words are being dragged out of him. "It makes you smell . . . different."

"Creepy," Will says reflexively. "Also can you possibly smell that?"

Hannibal just gives him a look.

“Right, you’re immortal,” Will mutters. Then he remembers the hunting lessons and brightens. “Can you teach me?”

A month later, Will is riding his bike when he rides through a cloud of dust raised by a passing car and finds himself a desert. Hannibal throws a water bottle at him and teaches him how to find an oasis by day and track the stars by night.

A week later, Will is diving into the town lake when he finds himself surfacing for air in the middle of a raging ocean. Hannibal grabs him securely around the waist and teaches him the proper way to swim and hold his breath and preserve his strength.

And so it continues.

Will takes a nap in the town green and wakes up on Mars in Habitable Zone 17. Hannibal brings him clothes and teaches him how to hide in plain sight.

Will time travels on his fourteenth birthday and ends up Hannibal steal the last remaining pair of stag antlers in the entire Milky Way. They celebrate with greasy space food, which tastes just as bad for you as greasy diner food.

Will spends his fifteenth birthday in prison for appearing in the Grand Zenna’s sacred maze covered in nothing but water because he’d slipped into the bathroom for a shower and emerged to screaming and holographic cameras. Hannibal laughs himself sick and then teaches Will to pick locks using nothing but the feel of the touchpad and the click of the tumblers.

On his sixteenth birthday, Hannibal sneaks them into the coronation of next Polas monarch, which lasts approximately an entire month. Hannibal teaches Will how to determine human-safe food from non-human-safe food, even if some of does turn Will into a blue smurf for a few hours. Hannibal, on the other hand, turns polka dot orange and pink, so both of them sneak back out and steal a spaceship to doze off in.

Hannibal gets arrested on Will’s seventeenth birthday, accused of using alchemy in an attempt to give himself telepathic abilities like the rest of the Veoxa, and Will has to learn how to pick physical handcuffs, chains, and a robotic straightjacket. They both barely avoid drowning.

They get into a brawl on Mount Olympus of Earth Seven, and Hannibal teaches Will how to fight. They are mistaken for gods on Cligharon, and Hannibal teaches Will how to use intimidation to its greatest effect. They steal from the wrong person on Pluto and spend five hours running from the InterSolar police, and Hannibal teaches Will how to drive a spaceship.

Sometimes, Will wonders which life is his true life: his life with Hannibal or his life at home.

Other times, he just hangs on for dear life when time grabs a hold of him again, because he knows Hannibal will always be there to catch him.

And then, ten days before Will turns eighteen, his parents die in a car crash.

This time, for the first time, Will actually holds onto Hannibal longer than Hannibal holds onto him.

“Will,” Hannibal says, and his voice is gentle, so, so gentle. “What has happened?”

“Don’t make me go back,” Will begs. “I don’t want to go back to – to that.” The past few days have been full of serious adults in uniform and annoyingly fake classmates and pity from strangers and questions about where Will is going to live and how he’s going to go handle his finances and whether he still is going to college and he just can’t anymore. He wants the security of Hannibal, always present and always there and always knowing exactly what Will needs.

Hannibal sighs. “I don’t have any control over where or when you go, Will,” he murmurs. “If I could, I would keep you with me always – but I can’t. It would be too dangerous.”

“Why? What could go wrong? You’re immortal, you’ll always find me.”

“I always try,” Hannibal corrects him. “And mostly, I succeed. But I am not your constant, Will. That belongs to time and time alone.”

But he doesn’t let Will go, so Will doesn’t let him go either.

After two days, Hannibal starts cooking more food, like he thinks Will’s deplenished energy levels are the reason he hasn’t jumped.

After three days, Hannibal lets him sleep in, despite his insistence on their daily exercise.

After four days, Hannibal tries to have a “talk” but Will brushes him aside by asking for pottery lessons.

After a week, Hannibal ties Will to a chair and drops a teacup on the ground, shattering it to a million pieces.

“What the actual hell, Hannibal?” Will shouts.

The teacup had been beautiful, the pride of Hannibal’s collection, carefully forged and even more carefully painted. Hannibal had chosen the best clay, the best wood for the fire, and the best paint money could buy. It had been so beautiful Will had been hesitant to look at it, much less touch it and drink tea out of it.

Hannibal nudges the pieces with his foot, a carefully disinterested mask on his face. “I am waiting for the teacup to gather itself up again, Will.”

“What?”

“By my calculations, time is to you what gravity is to me. Eventually, everything that goes up must go down.” Hannibal fixes him with a steely glare. “Eventually, everything that comes to me must return home.”

Time squirms angrily in Will’s stomach, and he bites his lip so hard he’s surprised he doesn’t break it. Hannibal knows damn well that Will never stays in one place longer than roughly twenty four hours, so he’s not surprised Hannibal knows Will’s doing something to prevent time from dragging him away again. Will’s never had so much control over his gift before, but it figures that emotions – the one thing Hannibal had never needed to teach Will to utilize – would be the key.

“I am home,” Will says defiantly. “You are my home.”

“I am your friend,” Hannibal says. “I am your family. I am the only one who will ever know you as well as you can ever be known, but Will – time has a far stronger hold upon you than I do, and it will shatter you if you continue to defy it.”

“I’ll live. I’ll find a way.”

Hannibal nudges the teacup shards again. “You will? And how will you do that? I’ve shattered a thousand cups against gravity, Will, and not a single one has ever put itself back together.”

“I am not a teacup. I am a person.”

“To time,” Hannibal replies, “what is the difference?”

This time, when time drags him away, it *burns* like fire, and Will can’t help his screams. Hannibal grabs him and the flower that blooms in their minds wilts under the stress of their collective pain, but Will still tries to hold on anyways, even as Hannibal’s eyes reflect a fear Will has never seen.

“Let go, damn you!” Hannibal shouts. “Let go before time breaks you!”

“Never,” Will snarls, and digs his fingers even tighter, but time is just so damn *strong* . . .

“Will, I can’t lose you, please,” Hannibal begs. “Let go, please, you can’t take me with you and you can’t stay here – please, mylimasis, *let go*! I promise I’ll find you, I swear it.”

Hannibal has never ever said “please” before.

He’s also never spoken in the language of his people, the one thing he’s refused to teach Will.

Will lets go.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: Hannibal's side of events.

When Hannibal Meets Will

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time Hannibal meets Will, he isn't even really Hannibal, to be honest. He's just a squalling babe, bloody and cold and angry.

His mother is weak and colder still, and Will is just a man with clothes that smell of ash and blood, face almost as dirty as the mud he kneels in as he gently tucks the baby into his shirt. Then he lowers the mother back down to the mud, closes her eyes, and sighs, because there is nothing else to be done.

"Hello, little one," the man says to the baby. "I guess it's just you and me now."

The baby coos in agreement and snuggles close, because the man is warm and comforting. The man heads for the nearest village, limping and slow, and croons a half-forgotten lullaby.

When the man leaves, the baby screams and screams and *screams*.

The second time Hannibal meets Will, he still isn't really Hannibal. He is a little boy, lost and alone and mute in a strange world, with blood dripping from his wounds and broken teeth and shattered dreams. He is an outsider, a slave, a no one, and perhaps this is why he does not question things when a naked man crash lands into the pile of dirt he is supposed to be moving.

The naked man is cursing and soaking wet, and the boy just stares.

Which is when the naked man looks up. His eyes go wide and his mouth parts, and it is with such honest surprise that the boy nearly closes his mouth – except his back still burns from the lash marks, and so he bears his teeth anew.

"Wow, tiny you is so *fierce*," the naked man says. "I really should've believed future you . . . well."

Words are slow to the boy's tongue. He hasn't spoken in so long . . .

He snarls instead. Animals are long gone from this world, but the primal sound of thunder in their throats is a part of them, neither easily forgotten nor easily mistaken. Slaves and kings alike have backed off when the boy reminds them of his ferocity, and he expects this man to be no different.

The naked man snarls back.

The boy drops his broom and charges, because it's one thing to issue a challenge and quite another to receive one. And the boy learned a long time ago to never turn down a challenge.

The naked man takes the full force of the boy's charge, but he twists fluidly up and away, and the boy finds himself snarling against the wall. No matter how he twists, he cannot get away from the naked man's hold, and so eventually he quiets. Conserving strength is always important in a challenge, because they can last for months.

The naked man laughs. "Well, you can't say your lessons in hand-to-hand combat were useless," the he says. "Now, how about we drop the snarling? I don't want to challenge you. I just want some clothing and maybe some food."

The boy nods. It's an alien gesture; only freed people normally bob their heads thusly. But it also is an effective way to communicate when slaves are punished for speaking, as the boy has been.

"Oh, no way, I know you better than that," the naked man says. He leans down over the boy and puts his mouth right next to the boy's ear, radiating heat and a slow sparking danger that makes the boy want to sit up straight. "You trained me. I know every single one of your tells. The second I let go, you're either going to bite me or kick me in the groin. None of that, I tell you. I've just jumped out of a flaming helicopter and I really don't fancy being bitten or kicked. So. I'll let you go and you move quietly away, or I'll knock you out."

The boy wrinkles his nose. He's been knocked unconscious many times, but for all its familiarity it has never boded well for him. Many times he has changed masters whilst unconscious.

The biting can wait.

The naked man releases him. He then stands there, completely relaxed, as though charging a master isn't generally immediately followed by a beating. And he most certainly isn't a fellow slave – his skin is smooth and pale, his face is mostly clean, and he looks the boy in the eye like he expects everyone to know who he is. There are no lash marks upon his skin, just a strange blue-and-white oval discoloration over his left breast.

"Well then," the naked man says, "where can I get some clothes?"

So the boy gets the man some clothes and some food, and then when the man gestures towards the woods, the boy follows because he's already going to be in trouble for not cleaning the floors and he might as well make the most of his beating.

The man makes a fire with quick, elegant movements, no hesitation and no fear, as though fire isn't forbidden to all slaves. Then he carefully begins arranging the food the boy has retrieved, separating them carefully into two piles. For a long moment the boy does not understand, until the man finally removes a piece of bread and holds it out to him.

"You must be starving." He shakes the bread. "Come on, eat, you're like skin and bones and it's really creepy because that's usually me."

The boy shrugs and takes the bread. It's hard and not very pleasant, but it's still better than watery gruel. The man watches him tear into it and then begins redoing the piles, until one is clearly bigger than the other. He pushes that pile closer to the boy.

The boy gives him a narrow-eyed look. Biting can still be on the table.

The man chews loudly on his piece of bread. “Come on, it’s as hard as a rock, can you blame me for offloading it on you? I’ve eaten better when actual dinosaurs were running around. Granted, I suppose cooking isn’t really on your repertoire yet. Just eat the food, will you? I don’t want our standard Q&A to be interrupted by your stomach.”

It takes an hour to consume all of the food. The man disappears at one point and returns with more sticks for the fire, although where he found them the boy has no idea. The floods that drove away the animals has left nothing but rotting, damp wood in their wake, and the boy hasn’t been near a proper fire in years. The man seems unconcerned, though; perhaps he has seen worse. The boy has heard whispers that across the sea, the lands are even more inhospitable, where the very air is filled with fire and the very water will strip one’s flesh from bones. Perhaps this strange man is from those lands.

When the food is done, the man claps his hands. “Okay, now that we are mostly fed and watered: where are we?”

He looks at the boy like he expects him to know.

The boy shrugs. He has had seventeen masters, and most times he never leaves the estate. All he knows is that his first master was in a province near a lake.

“Okay, so you don’t know. Wonderful. How old are you?”

The boy shrugs again. Age means nothing to a slave. You are alive or you are dead; that is all that matters.

The man leans forward. His eyes are hard to spot in the darkness of the encroaching night, but the boy stiffens all the same. The man is slipping into that dangerous state again, like a predator with prey in sights just waiting for the right moment to pounce and kill. The boy isn’t really sure if he could stop the man from killing him, honestly, and not just because the man is clearly used to frequent and good meals. The man is dangerous the same way a snake is; born and bred, and never able to shake the fangs that pose the greatest danger.

“You don’t know or you can’t tell me?” The man considers him. “You haven’t said a word at all. Normally you won’t shut up.”

The boy bears his teeth. He hasn’t spoken in years and he doesn’t intend to start now. What would he even say? *Who are you? Pointless; slaves do not ask questions of freedmen. Where did you come from? What would it matter? The boy would not know anyways.*

Then something seems to click into place, and the man leans forward even more, until he’s so close to the fire he risks being burned. The danger grows until it is thick in the air, stifling like smoke, and the boy is caught between the urge to bear his throat and *bite*.

He does neither, because then the man does something unexpected: he reaches out and touches the boy’s face.

Just with one finger, nothing more. Palm open and arm relaxed. Cautious.

Gentle.

And something in the boy sags, in relief, in surprise, in recognition. His lips fall gently closed until his teeth are tucked away again, and his spine goes liquid and soft, and he wants suddenly to push into that touch until it encompasses his whole face. He has never been touched thusly in his entire life, but he knows it so well, knows it and wants more, more, more.

“Oh, my own,” the man says. “What have they done to you?”

The boy does bear his throat then, because the man’s finger is tracing his cheeks and traveling down to his neck, and the man lets out a snarl of his own when his fingers reach the thick rope collar bound around the boy’s neck.

“We are burning this place down,” the man promises, and the danger is back and it is beautiful, like lying beneath the feet of a rearing stallion and knowing intimately the power and the threat but also knowing that those hooves will never make contact, because they are aimed at something just beyond and something even more fragile. “I am going to tear them apart with my *bare hands*.”

And, well. It’s not like the boy is going to protest.

The estate goes up in flames so beautifully that the boy wishes he could capture the image forever. Instead, he contents himself with burying his face in the man’s shoulders as they ride off.

The man is gone by morning, with nothing to mark his presence but the quietly dozing horse and empty second nest of blankets and the pale expanse of throat where the man cut the collar off and strangled the boy’s masters one by one.

It’s okay, though. The boy remembers how the man turned stone into fire, and he looks upon the next estate and he smiles.

The third time Hannibal meets Will, he still isn’t Hannibal. He’s a fugitive, a nightmare, a last hope, and when a stranger staggers out of the darkness with one hand to his head, the man jumps to his feet and fastens his hands around the stranger’s throat.

The stranger gurgles. “Ouch.”

“Identify yourself or die,” the man says.

The stranger smiles, teeth bloody like Death has punched him in the face and he went back for a second round. “You can’t kill me.”

Which is when the man sees that same blue-and-white oval discoloration high on the stranger’s chest, and for along moment he debates strangling the stranger anyways. It has been six winters since a man turned up and leveled an entire estate to the ground and freed a

boy who would become the country's most feared assassin, yet the man looks completely unchanged. It cannot be the same man.

The stranger closes his eyes and bares his throat. "Go ahead. Try and kill me."

The stranger is right, of course. The second the man begins to squeeze, he stops, because he knows this stranger, somehow, and deep down inside, the man lets out of a long sigh as the ground begins to thaw for the first time in his life.

The man grunts and clambers off. He makes sure to knee the man in the gut to ensure he can't be attacked, though.

"Rude," the stranger wheezes.

"Rudeness is sneaking up on a stranger's camp," the man tells him.

The stranger waves an airy hand. "It's impossible to sneak up on you. I've tried. Only succeeded once. You threw me off a balcony. I stopped."

"A . . . what?"

"Eh, give it like three centuries," the stranger says dismissively. He sits up and rubs carefully at his chest, which is covered in significantly more bruises than it was the last time they met. He seems remarkably . . . unconcerned about said bruises. "How are you doing?"

"It's no business of yours," the man says. He returns to his fire and carefully turns rotates the meat cooking over it; he would have defended himself in more than enough time to ensure that dinner was not burned, but now that there is no longer a need to defend himself, he definitely can ensure that dinner is not burned.

The stranger blinks in surprise. Perhaps he is a rich man like the rest the man has killed; perhaps he is used to everyone caring about him.

"Wait," the stranger says slowly, "don't you know who I am?"

The man has met many men. He has killed many pigs. He does not care for who they are, beyond his prey and then his dinner. "No. Should I?"

The stranger whistles and flops back down in the dirt. He is a contradiction like that: his shoulders say *relief* but his face says *sorrow*, his clenched fingers say *surprise* but his closed eyes say *understanding*. Perhaps the stranger does not know what the man is.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Apparently not," the stranger says nonsensically. "So. Who are you?"

The man tilts his head. "I am Lecter."

"Yeah, I know that bit."

“Do you?” The man removes one piece of meat from the fire and lays it to rest on a stone to cool. Then he adds another, slicing apart the thick cut of meat with the blade he stole from the first pig he had ever killed. It is a fine blade, even if it hadn’t been necessary for the killing; the man had ripped out the miserable, shivering pig’s throat with his own teeth. “Do you know why they call me Lecter?”

“ . . . It’s your name?”

“It is from the old language, the one that belonged to those who are no longer here. Depending on the pronunciation, it means ‘outsider’ and ‘reaper’. Or ‘assassin’.”

The stranger laughs so hard that tears fall from his eyes. Certainly pigs have laughed at the man before, but never with such genuine delight or abandonment. Usually it is with derision. “Of course your name is from a forgotten language and means ten thousand different things that all apply to you,” the stranger says between laughs. “Of course it does.”

“It is not forgotten. I remember it.”

“Yes, yes, and you’re a very special one indeed.” The stranger sits up then and eyes the meat the man has prepared. “Are you in a sharing mood, oh great assassin, or must I fetch my own?”

The stranger is dangerous. The man can see how he moves, how sharp his eyes are, how steady his breathing is. The man could probably defeat him, but it would be a difficult fight. Glorious, but difficult.

Still, the man has destroyed an entire town today. Perhaps it is time to rest.

The man offers one piece of meat to the stranger. “One good deed deserves another in turn,” he answers. “You freed me.”

“You freed yourself,” the stranger corrects immediately. “I merely hastened the process. What are we eating?”

“Pig,” the man says.

The stranger pauses with his mouth open. His eyes go narrow and blank, and he pointedly closes his mouth and sniffs at the meat like he could detect poisoning by scent alone. The man can, of course, but the man also knows poisons that are odorless and slow-acting.

The man adds another piece of wood to the fire. “If I wanted you dead,” he says mildly, “you would be.”

“Let me rephrase my question then. *Who* are we eating?”

The man pauses and looks at the stranger. Once again, he is a contradiction, at once relieved and annoyed, nonchalant and curious. He seems neither offended by the man’s deed nor aghast at the implication. Perhaps he is a mind reader, like the First Ones. They died out long before the Second Ones and the Third Ones, but there are always those who survive, and the stranger seems canny enough to have done so.

Still. If the stranger wishes to try his hand at hunting, the man will not stop him. “Does it matter?” the man asks.

The stranger takes a bite instead of answering, and that, the man supposes, is that.

They finish the meal in silence.

When the stranger sets aside his third piece of meat, he sighs and says, “Now I really miss salt. Remind me to pack some in the future, will you?”

“I am not one of the Second Ones,” the man replies. “How could I possibly remind you in the future?”

The stranger rolls over, a crease between his eyes. “Second what?”

“First came the mind readers, Second came the immortals who defied time, and Third came the strangers who obeyed time,” the man explains. It is something every child knows, the story of the ones who came before and are no longer here. It is the history of their world, dying though it may be. “And then came the humans.”

“Go humans,” the stranger murmurs.

The man gives the stranger a look. It’s very difficult to define human, of course, but the man feels fairly safe in saying that the stranger is most certainly not.

The stranger catches his look and grins. “I’m just a human with a weird quirk,” he says. “Also, we really need to work on that name because I am not calling you Lecter for the rest of our lives.”

“Names are not important,” the man says dismissively. What use is a name to a fugitive or an assassin? He is a shadow in the dark, an unknown on the stage, a nightmare to be feared. No name could ever capture all what he is, and even if one could, who would be around to call him by it?

“On the contrary,” the stranger replies, “names are all we left when the world crumbles around us and we have neither memories nor mementos to guide us.”

He sounds like he’s speaking from personal experience. There’s something very haunted in his movements and his eyes, like everything he sees in tainted in blood and everything he touches is but a faint reminder of what he has lost. Even the fire and the simple meal seem overwhelmingly generous to him. Yet he bears no marks of enslavement or other deprivation, and the man doesn’t think the stranger is the type for self-flagellation. Something happened to the stranger.

The man is not sure he wishes to know exactly what.

The stranger raises his hands close to the fire, as if warming himself. “Don’t worry. It happened a long, long time ago.”

“I see no reason to take on your troubles,” the man tells him, because he was never worried about the stranger. He is only curious, and hardly even that.

The stranger smiles, and it is faint but it truly lights up his face. For some reason that reply amuses him immensely. “But you are curious. Figures. You always are.”

“And what is that to you?”

“A reminder,” the stranger says. “A good one.”

Then the stranger reaches out his hands to the man, fingers curled and palms relaxed, open invitation in every inch of his body. And what an invitation it is, for the man can read his desperation and his longing, even though the stranger has only met the man once before. Perhaps the stranger is simply overly sentimental.

Either way, the man senses no danger, so he obligingly scoots forward and raises his own hands to the stranger’s.

Only the stranger doesn’t clasp his hands.

The stranger instead cups his face, lowering their foreheads together before the man can so much as startle, and the second their skin touches, the man gasps and goes still. Something is blossoming in the depths of his mind, like a seed long buried finally breaking through, and it feels so right that the man can do nothing but close his eyes helplessly and bask in the contentment of the moment, so perfect and beautiful and wondrous.

This is where the man belongs, and where he will always belong. He will carry that seedling forever, as a reminder of the beautiful moment when two minds touch for the first time.

“My name is Will Graham,” the stranger murmurs, his breath the faintest puff of warm air against the man. “And I name you Hannibal, because – come on, it’s hilarious, you’re totally smiling – because it rhymes with – ”

Then the man’s hands are gone, and his words, and the moment is shattered.

Hannibal Lecter opens his eyes for the first time.

The first time Hannibal Lecter meets Will Graham, he is sleeping in a tiny little abandoned hut. He is injured and bleeding and so tired that he practically fell asleep on his feet, but the second he feels the telltale displacement of air from someone moving close to him, Hannibal rolls smoothly to his feet and pounces.

His blow sends the intruder against the wall with a crack of flesh meeting flesh, but Hannibal stops immediately because he knows this man, knows him by skin touch and the smooth glide of his movements as the intruder dodges his instinctive second punch.

“Will,” Hannibal says.

“Oh! You still know who I am,” the man says cheerfully. “Lately that’s been a bit of a hit or miss. But your taste in abandoned hovels hasn’t changed, I see.”

Hannibal glares at him. He’s been fighting an all-out war to break every pig he comes across in this world; of course his living accommodations haven’t been the prettiest. Sometimes he even sleeps in trees when things are dire. The little hut tonight had been a blessing, especially since he could close the door and actually lit a fire for once.

“Aaand your glare hasn’t changed either.” Will rubs at his jaw, but the shadows generated by his movements don’t stop Hannibal from making out that he wearing the strangest outfit Hannibal has ever seen. It is smooth and shiny, like a gem polished to perfection, but it flexes naturally when Will moves. It also contains dials and tubes that wrap around his chest and back. The final touch is a logo on the front, a star with some strange scribbles in the center.

Weird outfit aside, it is most definitely Will; Hannibal would know him no matter the attire. So when Will reaches for him, Hannibal allows their foreheads to come together.

This time, they both sigh in contentment when the flower blooms.

“What is this?” Hannibal croaks out. “What did you do to me?”

Will sighs against his cheek, breath hot like a dragon. Hannibal can sense resignation, but no surprise or anger. He has been expecting this question.

“Once upon a time,” Will says quietly, “a little boy met a man in a field, and they forged a connection that will last until the end of time. Except the man already had it and the little boy didn’t, and he told the little boy that the day would come where he would have it and the man would not. Unfortunately he had no answers because the little boy had had no answers. So, Hannibal, the answer is: I don’t know. But I wouldn’t give it up. Would you?”

Hannibal thinks of how his heart races every time he sees men with brown hair and blue eyes, how he dreams late in the night of gentle hands and amused laughter, how even now he holds steadily onto a man he knows almost nothing about.

How he knows without having to ask that Will is telling no lie.

Hannibal swallows. “No.”

Will’s shoulders shudder and relax, and Will leans further against him. It kindles a warmth deep in Hannibal’s gut, warmer than any fire could ever manage, and he wonders at the power he holds over this strange man.

Then Will moves away, scraping at his eyes, and says, “I suppose you have more questions. I’ll trade you for some food, I am starving.”

Hannibal wordlessly retrieves some fish he’d managed to catch in a nearby river. He’d smoked them with the intention of building up a food storage as he recovered, but for answers and for more Will, Hannibal will gladly sacrifice them. He can always find more fish later.

“Who are you?” Hannibal begins.

Will tears a strip off a fish and chews noisily. “Don’t really know, to be honest,” he says. “I’ve been bouncing around since I was young, even more so after that fiasco with the end of the universe. Sometimes I go forward and sometimes I go backwards. Today I was going to do some deep sea diving with you, but now I’m here so I guess that will have to wait.” He glances up, mouth curving into a smile. “Unless of course you mean who I am to *you*.”

“That would be helpful, yes.”

“Well, you found me. So I suppose the question is better answered by you.”

“You found me,” Hannibal points out. “You crashed into my house and cut my collar off my neck and saved me.”

Will waves an airy hand. “It’s nothing compared to that time I got mixed up in the Titan slave trade and you had to come in and rescue me. You complained the whole way home about how my lingerie was picked up by someone with no taste and the body oil offended your delicate nose.”

Hannibal blinks.

“It’ll happen eventually. To you, anyways. Obviously it already happened to me.”

“So . . . you know me in the future,” Hannibal says slowly.

“Yeah. I don’t . . . experience time like you. Or maybe you don’t experience time like me.” Will tears another bite off of the fish and chews noisily. For all of his excellent fighting skills, he’d be terrible at stealth. Perhaps that is why he is so excellent a fighter, of course. “The older I grow, the younger you do. The more I know about you, the less you know about me. It’s . . . interesting.”

The way he pointedly doesn’t make eye contact says volumes. “It makes you sad,” Hannibal surmises.

Will is silent for a long moment. There are old shadows on his face, deeper and more terrible than any the fire in front of them could cast. Painful things have happened to this man, and apparently the scars left behind are as vivid on the inside as they are on the outside.

“I’ll take as much of you as I can get,” Will says quietly. “Sometimes I worry that I’ll just . . . run out of time with you.”

“But you always find me?”

Will smiles. “We always find each other. That connection in our head is for more than just saying hello, you know. No matter where I go, you’re never far behind. So if you want to know who I am, Hannibal, the answer is simple. I am your friend.”

By morning, Hannibal’s friend is gone. The only thing to mark his presence is three fresh fish left on the doorstep.

The next time they meet, Will is far less composed. He's wavering around on his feet like he's imbibed too much, and Hannibal watches him from his lookout perch for a good five minutes before he sighs and starts climbing down.

"Oh, heeey, Hanniiii," Will slurs when Hannibal comes in range. "Why – Why're there five of you?"

Will smells like fresh compost. Hannibal wrinkles his nose. "Why are you wobbling?"

Will flaps his hand and almost smacks himself in the face. "Need calories. Lots and lots of calories. Lesson three. Or two. A lesson. Fooooooooood. Sleep."

"Why me," Hannibal says, and promptly drags the ever-heavier man back to the small house he's painstakingly built up.

Thankfully, after Hannibal forces some tea and food down his throat and Will takes a three hour long nap, he emerges looking much better, even if he smells just as bad. Hannibal pinches his nose closed and points in the direction of the nearest stream. Will comes back shivering but most definitely cleaner.

"So," Hannibal says, as Will devours more food, "lesson three?"

"Oh yeah," Will says, almost as an afterthought. "Lessons. You said they were important for me to learn."

"What lessons?"

Will swallows the biggest bite of food Hannibal has ever seen. He tenses and waits for Will to choke, but by some miracle, the man doesn't. His eyes water a little bit, but the lump makes its way down his throat and then he continues on his quest to completely demolish Hannibal's food stores. Perhaps whatever strange power allows him to disappear and reappear randomly also allows him the ability to expand his throat.

"Lesson one," Will begins, "don't spoil the future. Lesson two: if the future is spoiled, listen and learn. Lesson three: find food and water. And lesson four."

Hannibal waits. And waits. "Lesson four?" he prompts.

Will puts down his food and links his fingers beneath his chin. He looks completely serious for the first time that Hannibal has ever seen. "Lesson four," Will says, "never fight the pull of time."

And just like that, Hannibal finally gets it. He knows what Will is. "You're one of the Third Ones. Why didn't you just tell me that?"

Will stares at him blankly. "The what now?"

"I've told you this before. First came the mind readers, Second came the immortals who defied time, and Third came the strangers who obeyed time. You're a Third One. You obey

the call of time."

For some reason, Will finds this immensely amusing. "I most certainly haven't heard this before. God, that sounds like a story made up by a drunk man."

Hannibal wants to object, but he also has a very good memory. He remembers Will telling him that the more he learns about Will, the less Will is going to know about him. It almost makes him angry, because he has nothing and no one besides Will. Why is he punished with something so perfect for him that it is simultaneously so out of reach?

Maybe this is the pigs' revenge. Or maybe it's just fate.

In another life, perhaps, Hannibal was born a rich free man and he was free to live with Will with no problems at all.

"Well, do go on," Will prompts. "I wouldn't want to miss more riveting stories about your world."

So Hannibal tells him, mostly because he figures asking Will where he came from is going to be a bit of a waste. He tells him about the wastelands to the west and the waters that swallowed the east. He tells him about the monstrous birds that roam the north and the equally monstrous fish that roam the south. He tells him about the rebellion that is spreading like fire around the land, although he leaves out the bit where Will caused it. Lesson one is still fresh in his mind.

"A rebel," Will comments in the end. "How fitting. Do you have a cool nickname?"

Hannibal gives him a look. Sometimes he can't believe that Will is older than him and has seen sights Hannibal never will. "No."

"Come on, every historical figure that's worth remembering has a nickname."

"This is not history, Will. This is war."

Will smiles, slow and sad. "Hannibal, every war is history. Maybe it isn't written down or spoken, but it's still history. Your campaign left scars on the very earth you walk upon. History will remember that."

Hannibal wants to ask, *How would you know?* But something stops him.

Unfortunately or fortunately, Will seems to understand anyways. "I've fought in every war that's ever happened. Perils of being a time traveler. And each war leaves an indelible mark upon the very fabric of space. Either you'll pick a name for yourself or history will, Hannibal. And you might not like what history calls you."

The next pig Hannibal slaughters starts screaming about "the Doctor" the moment he catches sight of Hannibal. Hannibal kills him quickly, but the screams take root as only dying ones can.

It wasn't Hannibal's intention, of course. He only wore a doctor's mask because it was nearby and convenient.

But "doctor" is one of the old words. It means warrior and healer both, and Hannibal isn't much of a healer but he supposes the first step to healing is excising the infection and killing pigs might qualify. So the next time Hannibal runs into a rebel faction and they ask who he is, Hannibal smiles politely and introduces himself as "Doctor Hannibal Lecter".

It's quite cathartic.

Eventually, enough of the lands are in turmoil that the rebels are finally able to claim a victory. They start creating a government and doling out punishment, and Hannibal decides to stick around only because he's one of the very few who can read and write, thanks to Will, so watching people fall over themselves to earn his favor is highly amusing.

Doctor, after all, also means soldier and scholar.

He half expects Will to turn up at his doorstep and mock the city that begins to grow around him. Only Will doesn't.

One year passes.

Then another.

The another.

And still, he waits.

When ten years pass, Hannibal begins to wonder if it was all a dream. He takes up sketching in his free time, endlessly replicating the blue-and-white design branded high on Will's chest. It's the clearest memory he has of Will, if only because there are hundreds of men with Will's hair and Will's blue eyes and Will's stature. But none have that design, and no one knows what it is. So Hannibal clings to it.

When twenty years pass, Hannibal begins to notice something . . . strange. Although his companions and compatriots develop wrinkled skin and stooped backs as proof of their age, his skin remains unmarred, as even scars smooth out and fade away in months. He does not grow weaker in body or mind, and although he maintains a cheerful outlook, he knows without having to look that whispers are beginning to grow.

When thirty years pass, Hannibal turns his attention to the wastelands of the west. No one has ever returned from a journey there, and playing doctor has grown boring. He sees the same diseases, doles out the same treatments, hears the same complaints. The country doesn't need a doctor anymore; it needs a new source of gossip that isn't the unaging Doctor Hannibal Lecter.

So Hannibal packs a bag with a few essentials, closes his practice, says farewell to what few will still open their doors to him, and goes about purchasing a ship.

He burns the sketches of Will, though. His memories of Will are as clear as though they had happened yesterday, and his muscle memory for drawing Will needs no more practice. He doesn't need Will to burden his steps anymore than they burden his dreams.

That, of course, is when Will returns.

Hannibal fishes Will, spluttering and half-drowned, out of the waves of a storm. He would've missed Will entirely if it had not been for the full moon and the anxious beating of his heart driving him forward. He rolls Will up in some blankets and pours warm soup down his throat, and then he sits down for an interrogation.

"Where have you been?" he demands.

Will shrugs. "How long has it been? Because I just left you, to be honest."

Jealously curdles Hannibal's stomach. It's ridiculous to be jealous of himself, but nothing in the old tales said anything about the immortality of the Third Ones. Will only has so long in this life, and Hannibal wants to be there for all of it.

"Thirty years," Hannibal confesses, and watches Will cough up a storm to rival the one smashing their little boat around.

"May I just remind you that I literally have no control?" Will says once he's calmed down. "I've been bouncing all over time and space since I was a child. My one constant has been you."

It's flattering. Not enough to cool the jealously in his stomach, but enough to temper it, at least.

Hannibal welcomes Will into his arms and presses their foreheads together to let the flower bloom. Hannibal's has been drooping, he can tell, but now it surges to life once more. Will's flower has a few more scars now, petals torn free violently, but when Hannibal asks, Will refuses to answer. It's probably just as well; perhaps there are some things Hannibal can only experience with Will, not hear about from him.

The next morning, when the storm clears, Will clambers onto the wall of the ship like an idiot and starts slapping at his wrist.

"What are you doing?" Hannibal says dryly.

He certainly has no intention of stopping Will. He has no idea if their fighting skills are on par yet, since Hannibal hasn't fought with anyone in years, but if Will wants to fall off and be drowned again, Hannibal certainly isn't going to stop him. He can always fish Will out again, and it's not like he's in any hurry to reach the forbidding wastelands of the west.

Then Will's next words blow any thought of the wastelands clear out of Hannibal's mind.

"I'm calling my spaceship to me." Will flashes a grin at Hannibal. "I think she'll make your roundtrip around the world a little bit easier."

Hannibal returns from his trip through the wastelands no different than how he left it, but the people react like he's the second coming of the First Ones. It's abrupt and confusing to go from building cities by hand to building them with robots, but Will's ship had been filled with countless innovations from his time and Hannibal puts every single one of them to use. It's purely selfish, of course; Will's thrusters had been damaged in the storm, and he'd refused to help when Hannibal had attempted to fly off into the stars.

"Everything happens in its own time," Will had said. "I don't the stars are ready for Hannibal Lecter just yet."

So Hannibal builds up his world. He practices stealth and politics and all the games the rich and the wise play, honing the skills Will once mentioned to him. He dabbles in science and medicine and psychology, switching names and titles and backgrounds like a snake sheds skin. He prepares and prepares and prepares, and on the day they make their very first flight into the stars, Hannibal is ready.

It is as every bit as beautiful as Will said it was.

He sees less of Will, nowadays. Fleeting glimpses, five minute encounters, sometimes just pictures in the news. Will seems as baffled by the brevity of their interactions as he is.

"I don't usually spend a lot of time with you," Will confesses in between bites of a bagel, "but usually I get at least a day. Sometimes up to a week."

"Am I losing you?"

But no – the flower that blooms between their minds is as strong as ever, flavored with petals of their varied experiences, and Will shows no hesitation or sign of slowing down. It's also disconcerting to see him blur into nothingness as time pulls him away, but when Hannibal checks him over he sees to suffer no ill effects from it.

Will pecks him on the cheek. "No," he says. "You're not losing me. I've just . . . got a lot of excess energy to burn off, that's all. I'm jumping around a lot. It'll settle."

Hannibal's calculation say otherwise, but Will vanishes before Hannibal can ever bring them up.

"Hannibal, don't," Will says, without even looking at him.

Hannibal slowly lowers his arm and takes a deep breath. "He just insulted you. And threw a drink at you."

“Hardly the worst thing anyone’s ever done. I admire his guts. And that tattoo.”

It’s the first time Will has ever turned up without that blue-and-white patterning on his chest. Will calls it a tattoo but he still won’t tell Hannibal why he got it or what it represents. Hannibal is pretty sure it’s a teacup, but now that it’s vanished from Will’s chest, his chance to ask questions is gone. He’d never thought it important until now.

“You cannot get a tattoo just because he has one.”

“Why not? They’re cool.” Will finishes dabbing off his face and turns back to him. “And I know you’re making that face because you don’t know how to tattoo someone, but suck it up, Doctor Lecter. You can hold my hand and criticize the artist’s technique with me. I’ll even let you sketch something.”

This does little to calm Hannibal. “His rudeness is appalling.”

“He’s also the Prince of this sector,” Will points out. “You can’t just kill him. Find another pig to wreak your vengeance upon.”

“No one should insult you.”

“Hannibal, I am telling you right now: do not kill that man. Seriously. It’s not worth it. He’ll get his comeuppance one day. Everything happens in its own time.”

Hannibal kills the man anyways. He’s the man who has lived for centuries and killed for just as long. It’s far from the first time, of course, and it’s also not the first time that such a thing sends the rest of the people around Hannibal into war.

Except for one thing.

The man’s heart had contained a dead man’s switch.

Hannibal is meditating upon the shores of the very last world when Will finally comes back. It’s been three years since he last saw him, three years since his bloodlust sent an entire galaxy spinning into death and destruction, and the supernova triggered by the Prince’s final gift has consumed everything around it. By his calculations he has less than two days before the supernova eats him too.

He doesn’t know what world he’s on. It has no name, much like Hannibal’s original one. Perhaps that is why he is content to die here.

Will falls from the sky on Hannibal’s last day alive. He is bruised and bleeding, like he never has been in all the times Hannibal has seen time travel, and there is ragged desperation in his eyes long before he glimpses the golden herald of destruction in the skies above.

“What happened to you?” Hannibal demands, jumping to his feet. He has come to terms with his death, but Will – Will must escape. “You can’t be here!”

Will’s mouth says, “Where else would I be?”

Will's flower says otherwise. His flower is fresh and bleeding, and Hannibal finds that every attempt to send reassurances across falls flat. Perhaps he has become too accustomed to the idea of his approaching doom. Either way, it completely fails to reassure Will at all, so Hannibal watches with resignation as Will frantically searches for anyway off the planet.

"It's too late for me," Hannibal tells Will eventually, caging him in with arms and hands. "You were right. But you, Will, you need to leave. I only have hours now."

"I won't leave you."

"You won't." Hannibal tries to smile. It's so hard and it burns deep in his throat; perhaps he should have smiled more and secluded himself less in the years since the war began and Will vanished. "You'll always have me. Find me in the future, Will."

"I don't care about the future," Will hisses. "I care about right now. You think I could go on after your death?"

"Of course you can. You said it yourself: you always find me, my time traveler."

"I always find you because you always exist," Will says. "You won't after that supernova eats the universe. Don't you get it? I've only survived so long because you're always there for me. You're my immortal."

Hannibal has to kiss him then. It's messy and terrible, because they've both been dancing around it for years and now there is only blood and tears in their way, but Hannibal can't send him away without this. He's loved Will for so long that he wants to walk into death with Will in his heart and lingering on his lips and laughing in his mind. It's the best death he can ask for, especially since he caused it.

"Fly away, my time traveler," Hannibal murmurs into Will's ear. "Fly away and find me in the future. I'll be waiting for you."

"Damn right you will be."

This time, when time begins to pull at Will, Hannibal opens his eyes and relaxes his hands so that he can feast upon Will before he vanishes.

Except Will . . . Will doesn't relax his hands.

"Will." Hannibal jerks at his arms, but Will is strong, so strong, both from being trained by Hannibal and training Hannibal. He can't get free. "Will, let me go. You know I can't go with you."

And Will's eyes are burning, golden and resplendent, like the supernova above, like a phoenix aflame and every inch of him is being consumed. Hannibal looks at him and understands how humans could be so certain that gods exist, for what mortal explanation could there for a man on fire with light streaming for every inch of his skin? He's so beautiful, so otherworldly, so different, and Hannibal wants to drink in every ray of light but he can't.

“Will, *let me go*!”

“No,” Will snarls, and his words shake the very foundations of the world. “*I refuse*.”

And for the first time in his very long life, Hannibal plunges straight into time itself, gasping and blinded and deafened, as all around him the supernova swallows his universe.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: The intricacies of life through time and space.

When Will and Hannibal Meet Each Other

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time Will meets Hannibal, he says, “Ouch.”

The first time Hannibal time travels, he says, “Ouch.”

Then Will vanishes into the pull of time, leaving Hannibal behind in the desolation of a world newly born of stardust and meteor shards, and Hannibal sighs and says, “How typical, Will.”

Attempting to stifle his jumps through time definitely had its drawbacks – Will suspects that the low level headache that pops up now and again may never vanish – but it can’t compare to the pain of jumping straight through a universe-ending supernova dragging an immortal man behind him. Will is insensate with pain, tears flowing from him in a never-ending river of blood, and he honestly isn’t sure whether he’s sadder for having to leave Hannibal behind or for dragging Hannibal along.

Somehow, Will doesn’t die. Perhaps this is due to his own power or Hannibal’s interference, but either way, Will keeps on breathing.

“Lesson four,” Hannibal tells Will, serious as he’s never been, dabbing away at the blood on Will’s skinned knee with one hand and the tears from Will’s eyes with the other, “never attempt to fight the pull of time.”

“Why would I do that?” Will asks, tiny and small and young.

Hannibal just smiles, hard and sad the way he does sometimes when he thinks of things he won’t tell Will about. “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

“That’s a grown-up excuse.”

“And one day you’ll be a grown-up too, and I guarantee you’ll say the same thing to me.”

Consciousness returns in fits and starts, slow like the melting of snow and inevitable like the rising of the sun. First Will becomes aware of gritty sand beneath his cheek, and then the warm spots on his back from the sun, and then the gentle lapping of the ocean at his back. He hears the sound of twittering birds and squeaking squirrels. He smells the wild wind and the salt of the sea.

Eventually, Will manages to haul himself to his feet. His clothes are almost completely destroyed, either from the supernova or from the friction burn of dragging a full grown man through space and time, and so Will begins the arduous process of putting to practice the

survival skills Hannibal had once so carefully taught him. He makes a lean-to of solid branches, gathers leaves and moss for a bed, and arranges sticks for a fire. He catches a fat, lazy squirrel that has never known a fear of humans and collects fresh berries and notes the position of several streams.

Just as the meat is cooked and he is about to take his first bite, salivating at the prospect of food, time steals him away.

(His campsite remains undisturbed. His gathered supplies are eaten by other animals or return to the ground. The squirrels never do learn a fear of humans, for the last of them died millennia ago of a disease without a cure. The sole survivor had built a spaceship from the remnants of a dead old and left for the stars to find a new one.)

Will lands in a giant dumpster.

“Aw, come on,” he complains. Unfortunately or fortunately, his complaint is drowned out by the loudest music Will has ever heard, so loud that the entire dumpster is actually shaking with each beat. He can’t understand any of the words, though, so when Will finally claws his way out of the dumpster, for a moment he forgets the song when he sees the floating lanterns gracing the streets.

They are beautiful, in a way, translucent like the fog before a sunrise, and anchored to the ground with a single long strand of glistening blue material. Will trots up for a closer look at the nearest one and gets blasted in the face by the strong scent of cinnamon.

Going to the next one results in a blast of strawberry, and the next pine, and the next bread. Still, it doesn’t really click until another person on the street takes one visible sniff of Will and backs away so fast that they nearly fall over in their haste to get away. And, yeah, Will doesn’t exactly smell the greatest right now, thanks to his dunk into the ocean and then the dumpster, but the behavior isn’t unfamiliar.

Hannibal had taught Will that each new world used a different way to interact with the world. Some used words, like Will’s birth world. Some used sound. And some used scent.

Will takes one good sniff of himself and promptly gags. Then he makes a beeline for the nearest decontamination area.

Will, of course, has no money or meaningful currency on him, but the staff manning the station make outraged faces once he gets within range and quickly usher him into the nearest station. It’s not particularly large, but it has all the right supplies and after getting drenched by freezing rain and misted by green dust, he figures out the right buttons.

Just as he’s finally scrubbed everything off and is about to dry off, time steals him away.

(The decontamination procedure continues to cycle for another 10 kols. Then the staff turn off the station and then fetch a translator, one who can communicate via mouth sounds and via scent. When the translator finds the station empty, he is at first bemused and then, quite

abruptly, sad. The staff cocoon him in comforting scents, but the translator just takes a deep breath and leaves.)

Will doesn't land this time so much as half drown, going from pleasantly wet to five feet underwater in a minute. When he sputters, his lungs fill with water that tastes sweet but burns like spice, and he's so busy flailing his way to the surface that he hardly registers the rising sound of an approaching vehicle before he's unceremoniously scooped out and thrown yelping onto the deck.

"Aw, it's just another man," whines a voice to his right.

"Huh, I thought they'd all died," says another to his left.

"Are you two really complaining about freshly caught dinner?" snaps a third.

Will frantically pushes his bangs out of his eyes and ventures, "Uh, I'd prefer not to be eaten? I've been told I would taste terrible."

The speakers, as it turns out, are a group of very lovely women armed with spears that crackle with electricity in one hand and glowing runes that line their palms in another. Their eyes are golden through and through and their hair is twisted up into elaborate braids lined with shells and bones. They ignore Will as if he's a dog yapping in the wind, arguing back and forth about whether or not to eat him now or toss him back and see if he survives and grows bigger.

Will eyes the edge of the little ship and thinks seriously about doing a nose dive back into the water.

Finally, after an argument that dissolves into actual fighting with spears, one of the women turns to Will and says, "How did you survive the salvation?"

Will blinks. "The what now?"

"The salvation," the woman repeats. She flicks her wrist impatiently towards the vast ocean they're still speeding over. "The great flood, I think the humans called it. We thought we had caught the last survivors two moons ago."

"I'm, uh. New to the area?"

One of the others groans. "I *told* the General we should have pushed forward. But no, he wanted to go investigate a cemetery!"

The first woman ignores her and leans closer to Will. Her teeth are so sharp Will thinks she could bite his hand clean off. "You must be very strong to have swam so far," she purrs. "Perhaps this was a fortunate meeting after all."

Will swallows involuntarily. Everything about her screams *danger*, but it's the kind of distant danger that calls to adventurers, like a wolf howling from a distant peak or a whale singing in the night. He wants to lean forward and lose himself in her golden gaze and touch her soft,

elaborately bound hair; he simultaneously wants to take his chances and jump from the boat and swim as long as he needs to before he can find land or people who don't give off predator-on-the-hunt vibes.

Flight wins out. Will is a time traveler for a reason.

The woman sinks her claws into his wrist before he gets his second leg over the wall, and then she dislocates his shoulder in one clean, savage pull.

Will screams and kicks at her, but her skin is as hard as cement and all he gets for his efforts is a bruised foot.

The woman smiles at him with all of those perfect, sharp teeth. "Oh, you're smart," she says. "Most can't resist a proper siren. I haven't seen anyone who could since the General. This was indeed a most fortunate meeting, human."

This time, Will closes his eyes in relief when time steals him away just as the ship reaches the colony filled with thousands of other gold-eyed sirens that look up eagerly as they approach.

(The sirens pout all the way through their report. The General laughs and proposes a new campaign to clear out survivors in three moons' time, which is sufficiently distracting. As soon as he is alone, he lets the cup he was holding fall and shatter on the ground.)

Will lands on a roof, screams when his dislocated shoulder collides with the hard surface, and promptly passes out when he rolls down, whacks his head on the gutter, and falls a terrifyingly long distance to the ground.

Or what seems like a terrifyingly long distance, anyways. Will is unconscious for most of it.

He wakes up being tended to by a trio of silent beings dressed in muted grays and browns. They don't respond to his questions nor do they seem concerned when he tries to leave, but his dislocated shoulder and throbbing head protest heavily, so he ends up staying put. They finish washing his feet with a green liquid that smells like seawater and leave him slightly damp, highly confused, and very naked.

Will helps himself to some nibbles of the red octagons that are soft and smell like Earth eggs, and then he promptly passes out.

A being dressed in green wakes him up some time later by poking rather pointedly at his shoulder. Will is leaping up before he even registers the pain, and then he slams the being into the nearest wall hard enough that there is a dreadful cracking sound. Before Will even has time to panic, the being looks straight into Will's face and well. After seeing aliens with no eyes, he supposes seeing aliens with no mouths isn't quite as disconcerting.

He attempts the mimic the being's hand gestures, but given the fact that he's down to one arm with his shoulder out of commission and the fact that the being has six arms, he fails miserably.

The being brings him more octagons that smell like eggs and then leaves.

Will sleeps some more. When he wakes up again, something like a sun has risen, if the sun was so bright that Will starts sweating the moment he sticks his head out of the door. He can't see any of the beings around, but his stomach is starting to growl so he decides to wander around. No guards stop him, and the establishment he's in seems set up in a circular pattern, with Will's dwelling in the center and surrounded by an ever-growing series of circles.

Will wanders, sweats profusely, and wanders some more.

The world is dry and barren, with only shifting sand beneath his feet and the burning sun overhead. Will sees and hears no animals, and the trees are withered and desiccated, and outside of the encampment there are only open, empty miles in every direction.

Either a world at the end or a world at the beginning. Will can never quite tell which direction time will send him in.

Finally, while he passes another building, one of the beings gestures frantically at him from the entrance. They are careful to not allow a single inch of skin to be seen and Will can feel the prickling feeling of skin burning on his neck, so he concedes the battle and steps inside.

Just as the being – dressed in red, this one – offers him a strange long tube capped at one end, time pulls him away.

(The Traveler arrives within seven shiftings. They are all travelers, but the Traveler was the first to make contact with the others and he remains the only one, moving between groups and bearing news or food or advice for new encampments. He fell from the sky, and so they called upon him to assist with the second Traveler. He is remarkably saddened by the news that the second Traveler has vanished, although not surprised. No matter how they ask, he will not explain. He merely wraps his cloaks around him and sets off towards the horizon. But then again, this is not new behavior for the Traveler. One cannot cage sand with questions.)

Will lands in lake, on a cloud, in a prison, on an asteroid, in a hurricane, on a treehouse. He is alone and he is not; he is moving forward and moving backwards; he is treated and fed and beaten and exiled.

And always, he can feel the flower in his mind reaching out, out, *out* to wherever Hannibal is.

When he finally comes across Hannibal again, Will's hair is long enough to brush his shoulders. His body is a patchwork of scars and his voice hasn't been used in so long he sometimes forgets he has it. He is dirty and hungry and tired, so tired he can hardly sit upright, but the moment Hannibal's hand touches his neck, he knows he is home.

"Hannibal," Will croaks.

“My darling,” Hannibal says, moving smoothly around him. He is wearing what looks like a normal suit, but Will’s been bouncing around in time long enough to recognize the telltale shimmer of nanotechnology hiding in the weave of his clothing. It is as much metaphorical armor to face the world as it is physical armor that can deflect energy blasts and initiate skin repairs the second an injury occurs. “How weary you look.”

Will lets his head thump against Hannibal’s neck. “It’s been a long time,” Will says, and then nothing else. Hannibal knows him better than anyone; he needs no more words to understand Will.

“Well, then let’s make the most of what little time we do have,” Hannibal replies.

His nanotech expands, weaving over Hannibal’s arms until it begins to climb over Will as well. He shivers; it feels like tiny warm ants crawling all over his body, instead of the cold robotic pinpricks he was expecting. It swallows them whole together before Hannibal initiates flight, and Will decides it’s safe to pass out now. Hannibal will always protect him.

Will comes to in a warm pool. His first instinct is to panic, because the last time he woke up in a body of water he was almost dinner for carnivorous sirens, but just before he leaps out and slips all over the floor, Hannibal wades over and catches him.

“Please do not exacerbate your injuries,” Hannibal says curtly. “I just finished putting you back together.”

Will slumps back. “Habit.”

“You learned how to swim as a child.”

“Yeah, but you can’t outswim a siren. And they were hungry sirens too.”

Hannibal huffs. It’s generally the sound he makes when he doesn’t wish to give away how amused he is at something. “A beautiful meal is a perfect dinner to a siren.”

“When’s the last time you ate with sirens?”

“I never have. But stories of them abound, especially once they learned how to take to the skies and then to space. I heard that once they managed to eat their way through an entire colony ship and left only bones and ashes in their wake.”

Will rolls his head to the side. The pool they’re in is enormous, complete with a little waterfall at one end and a bubbling spring at another. The ceiling is high and dotted with soft lights. It is utterly beautiful, like a painting brought to life. “Where are we?”

“Hmm? A little . . . exercise in indulgence.” When Will rolls his eyes, Hannibal continues, “I have been working on a project. Sometimes I know my mind requires breaks to integrate the information and see new patterns, but I am loathe to give up the hunt. So I swim, to keep the body as fit as the mind. It is easy to lose oneself in counting laps. The addition of the pool to the house was quite expensive, but I deemed it worth the expense.”

“Yeah, I imagine just getting an architect was more than I’ll ever have in the bank.”

“Designing the structure was not a problem,” Hannibal says. “The expense came from procuring the materials. The water on this world is very acidic to humans, either by natural evolution or due to pollution by the original population. They left this world long ago and never returned, and the greatest minds haven’t quite figured out how to counteract the effects. Besides, the current owners of the world face no difficulties with the acidity.”

Will sticks his tongue out just for the hell of it. The water tastes fine to him. “Hannibal Lecter, did you import water from across . . . well, whatever galaxy we’re in just to have a pool?”

Hannibal shrugs. The movement sends little ripples of warmth across Will’s body, and it’s amazing. “It was not difficult. This kind of water is a very valuable commodity, and as such, I am proficient supplier.”

“You . . . own water.”

“Technically,” Hannibal says, coming closer and letting their shoulders brush together, “we do. You gave me the formula.”

Will’s going to have to remember to do that one day. This pool is truly worth every single penny Hannibal spent for it. If he had gills, he would be asking to sleep in it, but that seems like asking for more panicked flailing the next time he wakes up, so when Hannibal guides him into a bathrobe and then half-carries him to a plush bed, he does not object. He does, however, object quite strenuously when Hannibal attempts to wander off.

“Nope,” Will mutters.

“You will be hungry when you wake, Will.”

Will glares at him with one eye. “I haven’t seen you since my hair was short enough to be considered a buzz cut. I’m not letting you out of my sight.”

It’s irrational and Will knows it. Hannibal cannot prevent him from time traveling, and when time pulls at him again he’ll lose sight of Hannibal anyways. But still. He hasn’t seen Hannibal in a long, long time, and now that he’s here, Will intends to make the most of it to hoard for the arduous days of skipping through time and space alone.

“It is not completely irrational,” Hannibal says, smoothing a hand through his hair. “We are all the other has. I . . . am also reluctant to leave you.”

Will holds still and waits. This time he waits until Hannibal has curled into bed next to him before he sleeps.

His dreams are nonsense: a riot of colors and sounds, smells and tastes, musings and memories. He drifts from situation to situation with no control and no rhythm. In one moment he dreams of Hannibal as an old withered man, back bent by time and hair bleached by the sunlight of a thousand worlds; in another, he sees a baby lying alone in a cradle, screaming for a mother who will never come. He sees Hannibal as a tail-bearing siren, a red-eyed werewolf, a rearing centaur, a hissing serpent. He sees a barren world filled to the brim

with bones and blood-stained seas. He sees a garden filled every tree in existence and an altar bearing a cup containing the light of the first supernova. He dreams of the void that eats all and the clay that brings life and the light that shines in the beating heart of a child born too soon. The beginning and the end, in dreams as in life.

Will wakes with the taste of light on his tongue. It's familiar, but he can't quite remember why.

Either way, he sets the problem aside for later. Hannibal is still sleeping next to him, and the sight is so new to Will that he just settles his head on his hands and watches.

He's never been around Hannibal long enough to see him sleep. It softens his features a little bit, so that he looks more like the human Will thought him to be instead of the ageless immortal Will knows him as.

It's . . . endearing.

It's also short-lived. Will's stomach lets out a mighty growl, and in between one blink and the next Hannibal has sat up and slipped out of the covers. Hannibal's never said where he trained, but Will curses his teachers all the same. He misses the quiet moments between them of his childhood.

"Breakfast," Hannibal says pointedly.

Will pats at his belly. "Yeah, food is probably a good idea."

He walks through the doorway and bumps into a full-blown masquerade ball.

"Lesson three," Hannibal tells Will, voice raised just enough to be heard over the sounds of Will devouring everything in sight, "always find food and water."

Will pauses to chase down his chicken with a sip of water and gives Hannibal the side-eye. "I'm not a child anymore. Obviously food and water are something to look for. Any survivalist would tell you that."

Will has never had interest in survival games or survivalist strategies. But he's had to learn, both from Hannibal and from trial and error. Nowadays he spends more of his life time traveling than living in the present, and he's entirely given up on school or making excuses. He knows Hannibal fears that one day he'll do nothing but time travel and that his normal life will be entirely lost, but he's not quite sure why Hannibal fears it so much. They both know that Hannibal will always find him.

Hannibal tugs on his hair. "Yes, you're a teenager who knows everything," he teases. "How absurd of me to assume that I am in any place to give you advice on life."

"You're a grown-up," Will says. "All you do is give advice."

"I also cook."

Will looks pointedly at the chicken soup in the corner. Hannibal has a habit of telling him exactly what he's eating, so he knows how extreme Hannibal can be when preparing meals. "Your cooking is just advice in culinary form."

"Perhaps I hope one day it will inspire you to eat better."

"The lesson is to find food. It never said anything about the quality. I could eat McDonalds and still be fulfilling the lesson."

"Please do not."

Since Will has no desire to be tossed in a dungeon, tortured, and buried in a shallow grave, he starts rummaging through rooms until he finds a place to steal an equally elaborate costume to blend in and then he sneaks his way back to the ballroom because, you know. Food. Lots and lots of food.

The food is awesome. Will isn't sure if it's because it's been so long since he's eaten or because the food really is very good, but either way he stuffs himself before he fills another plate and escapes to a balcony to eat in peace.

The scenery is beautiful from his balcony. The entire palace is constructed of some kind of polished stone that gleams different colors under the light of the two moons in the sky, and many of the columns and archways are crawling with vines that speak of a long history of cultivation. There are dozens of little fountains dotting the gardens and lanterns flicker gently in the wind to guide wandering people to the right path. It's like a castle straight out of a fairytale, if any Earth fairytale had had glowing stones, two moons, and carriages drawn by eight legged creatures.

"An inspiring costume," says a voice from the doorway, and Will startles so badly he drops the bite of food he was holding. "The Raven who is the whisperer and the guide and the temptation."

The man speaking is wearing the biggest set of antlers Will's ever seen in his life. He honestly has no idea how the man is able to stand without falling over the second he moves. The rest of his clothes look like real fur, ending in shiny metal like hooves at his ankles and wrists, and are dotted with glittering patches of gold.

"And you are?" Will says.

"I am the Stag, of course," the man says. "The predator and the prey who will carry us to the end of the world."

Will lets that marinate for a long moment, because it really deserves the silence and also if he speaks he'll burst out laughing. He's heard pretentious talk, and then there's Hannibal levels of pretentiousness.

He ends up laughing anyways.

Hannibal smiles, a polite little curve under his mask, and then he comes closer and puts his arm around Will's waist, warm and familiar like nothing else is in Will's life. "It is part of the mythology of this world. Ask anyone else and you'll receive a far more long-winded tale. How are you, Will?"

"Starving, as usual. This morning I woke up in a pool and then I found myself running around looking for a costume."

"I planned the menu myself. The food should be excellent."

"I'll eat almost anything at this rate." Will shoves another fruit tart in his mouth. "So what's this about mythology?"

"Ah. Yes. The people of this world used to dwell in a barren desert. They said one day a raven came to the king and whispered in his ear of an oasis where there would be no hunger, no thirst, no death. When the king asked how they could ever reach such an oasis, for surely it would take generations of wandering aimlessly on foot, the raven called a stag for assistance. The stag bore them faithfully forward, dragging their supplies and chasing away their enemies. When they finally reached the oasis, the stag and the raven burst into flames, and that light sunk into the very earth and has never gone out. That is why the stones and the plants of this world glow no matter what time of day it is, and why every dwelling has a brazier lit in honor of the raven who whispered and the stag who carried. It is said that when the stag and the raven return, we will know it is end of our time in the oasis."

"Our?" Will teases. "Have we gone native?"

Hannibal offers him a tiny smile. "I had to if I was to learn how to whisper. This language took me a long time to learn."

Sometimes, Will wonders if he could ever learn all of Hannibal's stories. He doesn't even know how old Hannibal is. For all he knows, he could do nothing else but sit at Hannibal's feet and listen until the universe exploded and he would still only know a tiny piece of Hannibal's long, long life.

"And the fire tricks?"

Hannibal leans over and rests his hand on the nearest part of the balcony wall. It glows in response, warm shifting light like waves cresting against a beach. "The light can be manipulated, if you are patient. I brought the oasis servants to tend to its waters and its gardens; asking for one burst of light to make myself scarce was hardly a strenuous request."

"How long do you plan to stay here?"

Hannibal hums. "Only a little while longer. Now that I have seen you, I must move on. You never visit me in the same place twice."

"You sound like a long suffering husband."

“If I was a long suffering husband, then I would be twirling my partner on the dance floor. You, as I recall, don’t really like to dance.”

Hannibal has a very particular way of infusing his words with meaning. It’s subtle and sometimes incredibly difficult to pick out, but Will grew up learning to see entire universes through Hannibal’s eyes. Hannibal taught him how to speak, how to read, how to run, how to fight, how to live. He knows Hannibal, and Hannibal knows him. As a result, he knows exactly when Hannibal is insulting him.

Will puts his plate down. “Are you saying I cannot dance?”

“I do not recall it being amongst the skills I taught you.”

“Maybe I’ve learned it since then.”

“Maybe you have. Shall we?”

It took ages for Will to learn how to fight. Mostly this was because his body was growing and changing and therefore he was more likely to stumble over his own feet than parry a blow, but he just wasn’t that good at the dance of combat. Hannibal could dance for hours without tiring, teeth bared and sweat pouring from his brow, and one time Will had bet on him during a gladiator match and walked away having won an entire solar system.

This time, when they dance, they are equally matched for the first time. They are both done growing, both experienced in fighting and fleeing, and both holding back spoilers they cannot yet reveal.

This time, dancing is *delightful*.

“My beautiful Raven,” Hannibal purrs, twirling him smoothly around the waist. “How well you’ve learned.”

“My magnificent Stag,” Will replies. “How faithfully you’ve waited.”

“You always find a way to me,” Hannibal says. “All I have to do is wait. Waiting is not difficult, merely monotonous.”

“Are you calling me boring?”

“Never,” Hannibal laughs, and that’s when the tempo of the dance picks up as the music shifts, faster and faster and faster, until Will is reaching out to grab one person’s hand at one moment only to be spent spinning through the air into the hands of another at the next. The dance partners switch and twirl and switch again, all around the room; Will dances with a fox and a elephant and a chimera and a moonbear and an eagle and a dolphin, round and round, until the music ends with him settling back into Hannibal’s arms again.

This is where I belong, Will thinks, just as he’s always thought. Who else could keep up with a time traveler besides an immortal?

The Raven is the whisperer of dreams, the guide to the oasis, the temptation towards a brighter future. Will looks at his Stag, his faithful, watchful, loyal stag, and throws himself straight towards a new oasis.

If finding Hannibal is like coming home and if dancing with him is like breathing, then kissing Hannibal is like nothing at all.

It's indescribable.

They break apart to the sound of wolf whistles from watching partners, raucous cheers and rowdy shouts. Apparently they don't mind dancing around Will and Hannibal, although a few toss them lewd, fawning looks.

Hannibal exhales against his ear, warm and steady, and Will nudges against his cheek for another kiss.

"That was . . . new," Hannibal says.

Will feels his heart stutter in his chest. Hannibal taught him how to read body language, and he's always been able to read Hannibal the best. Perhaps a kiss was not the best moment to falter for the first time. "Was it bad?"

"No. Nor unwelcome. I'm simply surprised, that's all. My brave raven. I should have known you would take the first step."

"So . . ."

Hannibal smiles at him and gifts him another kiss, deep and warm, and Will feels loved from the tips of his toes to the ends of his hair. "So it was lovely to know that my feelings on this matter are reciprocated."

Will kisses him again, because he has to, because he needs to, because Hannibal is his and no one else's and he'd never have it any other way.

And because of course time comes calling just then.

Will lands in a bar. He's not even sure when or where, since he can see a vampire talking seriously to an astronaut and a robot sparring with a ghost. Still, he doesn't pass up the opportunity to get as drunk as he possibly can.

He just kissed *Hannibal*. He's got to celebrate somehow.

Will drinks until he feels like he's going to explode, and then he drinks a little more. By the time he gets cut off, he's lying in a daze on the floor. Thankfully, time pulls him away before anyone comes looking for a bill payment.

(The owner is annoyed at the disappearance of a customer, but they cut their losses and restrain themselves to ranting about it to a friend, who tells a friend, who tells a friend. A rich

man pays off the debt and refuses to explain himself beyond the fact that the story just seemed amusing enough to be real.)

Will wakes up in a laboratory filled with equipment and ghosts, and after a few hard blinks and pinches don't make anything go away, he sighs, gets up, and starts searching. Only Hannibal would emblazon lab equipment with a blazing ravenstag.

He finds Hannibal bent over . . . well, some kind of machine, peering down as the machine does something to the sample contained beneath it. It looks like the combination of a mixer and a microscope, if either of those machines had a tiny little flamethrower and a readout display crunching numbers too fast for Will's bleary eyes to make out.

"You smell of alcohol," Hannibal says without turning around.

"Good morning to you too."

"It is actually afternoon."

"Then why is it so bright?"

"This world does not rotate, so the sun never sets. It is useful at least; I never worry about generating energy."

Will peers over Hannibal's shoulder. For all of Hannibal's complaints about his smell, all the man does is patiently stand there while Will blatantly uses him as a chair to get a better look at whatever Hannibal's doing to the blood sample. At least, he hopes it's blood. "What are you doing?"

"I am attempting to isolate triggers for your time jumps," Hannibal explains. He kisses Will on the forehead, but absently, like it's a reflex. Will enjoys that thought more than he should. "I am also attempting to isolate markers in your DNA that might contribute to your jumps, but that project is proving less fruitful than I had hoped. We only have so much time before you start jumping so frequently that I won't have time to take adequate samples from you."

"What?" Will says.

Hannibal gives him a look. "Denial does not suit you, my Will. We have already discussed that the rate of your jumping is growing exponentially. It is my hope that I can slow this rate or even stop it before you burn out."

Will takes a deep breath and then lets it out. It's difficult to gauge how much time passes when he jumps; Will doesn't even know how old he is anymore. The last birthday he celebrated seems like a long time ago, but it also could have just been a year ago in Earth time. He just . . . doesn't think about it. And Hannibal, for the most part, looks exactly the same.

He's never thought about the fact that the jumps are beginning to last shorter and shorter amounts of time, and what that might mean going forward.

“Can . . . Can that even be measured?” Will asks. “Hannibal, I don’t even know how long it’s been since I last saw you.”

“Neither do I.” Hannibal lets out a long sigh, the kind that makes his shoulders move and his neck bend. It’s not quite defeat, but it’s probably the saddest Will’s ever seen him. “But I have to try, Will.”

“Okay,” Will says.

What else can he say?

“Lesson two,” Hannibal tells Will, eyes dancing as he cuts through guards like butter, “if the future is spoiled, just listen and learn.”

Will pouts from where he’s tied up. “It’s not my fault the alarm tripped just as I was closing the window!”

“And that’s exactly what you told me last time.”

“I’ve never said that.”

“You will, one day. Incidentally, do try to remember the location of the dungeon. It’s rather necessary for telling me how to save you.”

“I could’ve saved myself!”

Hannibal snaps the neck of the last guard and gives him a look. Will can’t tell if it’s because the guards stripped him of clothing whilst searching for weapons or because he’s covered head to toe in neon green paint from when the alarm had gone off, but either way, Hannibal just sighs and cuts him down and tells him where to find his clothes.

Hannibal as a child is *adorable*. Will understands why Hannibal opted to indulge his every whim when he was young and bratty and demanding. Hell, all Will manages to take through time with him is the clothes on his back, and he still wants to give Hannibal the world.

It’s a little confusing, to be sure. Sometimes when he finds Hannibal, the man greets him with a kiss and a sigh of relief. Other times, he finds a grumpy Hannibal with scars and blood spatter from his enemies.

At least it makes it easier to sort out what he can and can’t tell Hannibal.

He swims to the very depths of the deepest ocean and flies through the highest skies. He explores untouched regions of deep space and ventures into the very heart of a star. He holds court with the greatest monarchs of time and scrapes for food amongst the beggars in the street. Through it all, Hannibal is with him.

And through it all, he sees his time with Hannibal dwindling.

“You’re afraid,” Hannibal says to him, one night when they’ve settled down in a little floating pod. The world’s oceans had swallowed all the lands, so everything was conducted in cities constructed in the skies. Hannibal had cooked Will an elaborate meal and then seduced him to the nest of blankets in his own floating home.

“Yes,” Will whispers back.

“Why?”

Will looks out at the sky. It’s so beautiful here with Hannibal, just clear open skies filled with stars above and seas below. Hannibal is warm at his side. They are safe.

“What if I run out of time with you?”

Hannibal scoffs. His eyes are half-shut from sleep, and his arm is a heavy, comforting weight across Will’s chest. “Nonsense. I am immortal. I will never stop looking for you. And you and I both know that our connection will last no matter how far ahead or behind or away you jump. We will always have time together.”

“You are immortal. I am not.”

Hannibal comes awake all at once. “What do you mean, Will?” he says, and his voice is deadly serious. His nails prick at Will’s skin like tiny snake bites. “What do you mean by that?”

Will swallows. “I think . . . I think I’m running out of time.”

Will is incredibly drunk when he’s captured by bandits bearing clubs and spears. He’s just rescued Hannibal from being a slave, so he thinks it’s worth taking out his anger through alcohol and some sparring, even if losing means that he gets tied up and yelled at by angry people.

“Who are you?” they demand.

They don’t accept “nobody” or “who cares” as an answer. They threaten to cut off his fingers or his toes but they can’t decide which, so instead they just start dumping freezing water over him.

Will’s drunkenness is probably why he tells them the story of the Ones. “I’m a Third One,” Will laughs, shivering as yet another bucket of freezing water is poured onto him. “First came the mind readers, Second came the immortals who defied time, and Third came the strangers who obeyed time.”

“What does that mean?” they cry.

“It means by morning I’ll be gone,” Will sings mockingly.

Just for that, they march him deep into the cave system and throw him into a very big, very dark pit. Will can't see anything, but he can feel the impression of hard objects that are a lot like bones, so Will scrambles back to the wall to wait out. Even he has noticed that he doesn't spend much time in between jumps anymore. Usually he wants as much time as possible with Hannibal, but right now he just closes his eyes and waits.

And waits.

And waits some more.

Hannibal was testing whether light was necessary to trigger my time jumps, Will thinks suddenly.

There will be no light down here. Will looks up, but it's pitch black; even if he were to try and start climbing out, there's no way he could tell if he was going in the right direction. And the pit's walls are smooth and slick, so much so that climbing would be a very arduous and thankless task.

Will waits and waits and keeps waiting.

He thinks of Hannibal, always moving, always changing, always waiting, and wonders just how he's able to be so calm when he knows Will is constantly leaving him. Hannibal is his pillar of strength, his beacon in the storm, his home away from home.

He wonders just how long Hannibal would wait for him if he never managed to leave this pit.

After the sixth repetition of Hannibal's favorite story, Will starts attacking the walls with his fingers. By the end, his fingers feel raw and smell terrible, but he's left a mark, and he knows Hannibal will find it. It's all he can offer Hannibal.

I love you, Will thinks, and slides down to the floor to wait and see whether time or death takes him first.

"What did you do to your hands?" Hannibal says in alarm.

The medical supplies are limited – apparently there's a war going on – but Will just smiles and says nothing.

"I really don't understand why you manage to break yourself as fast as I can put you together," Hannibal sighs, and goes to fetch lots of bandages and water.

"Lesson one," Hannibal tells Will, even as he corrects Will's fighting stance by kicking his leg out from under him, "don't spoil the future."

Will rubs the back of his leg and glares. Some days he really hates sparring with Hannibal, who has like six inches and a hundred pounds on Will, not mention thousands of years of experience. "Why not? Wouldn't knowing the information in advance be useful for, I don't know, both of us?"

“Ah, but answering that question would be spoiling the future,” Hannibal points out.

Will tackles him and sits on his chest.

For all the dangerous stunts Hannibal has coaxed Will into, for all the crazy situations Will has found Hannibal in, for all the times they’ve thrown caution to the wind and danced in accordance with the whims of fate and chance and time, Will has never been mortally injured. Broken bones, bruises, concussions, he’s had all of those, but time or Hannibal have always interceded before Will has suffered anything that Hannibal could not treat.

This is why when the knife slides into his gut, the pain paralyzes Will. Despite all the training Hannibal’s put him through, all the instincts Will’s gained over the years, he still freezes.

“Hannibal?” he whispers, and topples to the ground.

“Go into the stream in your head,” Hannibal says, dropping heavily to the ground next to him, grief and pain writ clear across his face. “The flowers are blooming there, Will. Can you see them?”

Will twitches his fingers. He sees no flowers. For once, the flower between them is dull and silent. It has been growing thin recently, like a plant deprived of the sun, but Will had never thought that might signal anything. He never thought it might be a sign that he might be in danger from the one person he has never ever feared.

“Just relax,” Hannibal tells him, and then he places the hand on the knife and shoves it deeper as Will screams.

Will had thought nothing could be more painful than refusing to jump through time or jumping through time dragging a full grown man behind him.

Apparently, neither measures up to Hannibal stabbing him in the gut.

Hannibal lays Will out on a bed, snaps a fancy looking lock over his wrists, and then starts bustling around. He doesn’t seem distressed by Will’s bleeding, only determined, and his determination grows even more when he drags a chair over next to Will and begins setting up an intravenous line.

“What are you doing?” Will asks.

Hannibal hunches his shoulders. “What I must.”

“You stabbed me.”

“If I had attempted this any other way, you would have jumped away from me,” Hannibal snaps. His face is calm, but his eyes are raw, as though he had been stabbed himself. Will isn’t surprised; Hannibal’s devotion to him is second to nothing, almost an obsession, and

Will knows because he likes it that way. “I needed time to perform the transfusion. You don’t jump when you’re injured too severely unless you are going to die anyways; the stab wound will keep you in the present so the transfusion can take place.”

The prick of the needle stings. Hannibal’s hands – always so steady, so loving, so beautiful – are shaking as he maneuvers the other end of the IV into his own arm.

An alarm goes off in a distant corner. Will knows the code: he has heard it once before, and he has never forgotten it.

“A supernova is coming,” he says, yanking on the cuff. “Hannibal, you need to leave – you won’t survive this, you don’t have a healing ability, and I can’t – I can’t take you with me, you’re too far away.”

Hannibal ignores him in favor of pricking him again and setting up a second IV line, transferring his own blood to Will. It’s hardly the first time Hannibal has ignored him, but there’s a huge difference between ignoring Will’s fashion suggestion or dinner requests and ignoring a universe consuming supernova that can kill them both.

“Hannibal, please,” Will tries.

Hannibal checks the lines and then settles back in his chair. Will can read him perfectly, as perfectly as he couldn’t a second ago when Hannibal had hugged him and then stabbed him clear in the stomach.

He has no intention of leaving.

“Your blood is the key,” Hannibal explains. “And so is mine. I am the immovable object, the mountain that does not bend, the soul that remains when all has withered and turned to ash. And you, Will, my beautiful Will, you are the unstoppable object, the storm that eats all, the soul that goes where no other dares.”

The air has grown hot around them. Will’s arm is slippery with sweat, but the bindings that tie him to the bed remain firm and Will can’t shake out the IV lines. Hannibal’s blood is cold, so cold, but Will is burning up and he can see the all-consuming brilliance of the supernova reflected in his beloved’s eyes. He already knows in his heart that there is nothing he can do, no words he can use that will convince Hannibal, no pleas he can make that will sway him, no promises he can make or extract. Hannibal is set; neither of them will leave without the other.

They will die together, at least.

“I will ground you here,” Hannibal continues, “for I cannot be moved. And you – you will carry us through, so that we might survive this.”

“We can’t,” Will says helplessly. “I can’t survive a supernova. We’ll *die here*, Hannibal.”

“If I fail,” Hannibal says, “then we die together. Your time with me grows shorter and shorter; I refuse to have a time when I am not with you at all. I can see it coming, and I know

you can see it too. I will never be alive without you, Will. I will have you or I will burn up, so that I will never know a time when I wait forever for a visit that fails to come. I am tired of waiting."

In the distance, the alarm cuts out. Already the end has reached them. Perhaps they've always been heading towards this. What other end is there for an unstoppable man and an immovable man besides mutually assured destruction?

Will reaches out, ignoring the pain in his gut, ignoring the pull of the needles, ignoring the burning all around him, and grasps Hannibal's hand. It is slippery and hot, but the flower blooms between them once again, unfolding in a million petals even as the supernova sears away the edges, and Will knows he will never let Hannibal go. How can he let go of someone who is part of him, flesh and blood and soul?

"I love you," Will says.

It's the last thing he says before the supernova eats them both.

Will dreams of a golden flower, petals made of solar flares and seeds of stardust. It tumbles through space, gleaming and glittering as it flies along the path of an ancient dance, bypassing stars and black holes as easily as past and future.

One day, a supernova knocks it off course. Just a little: this flower is older than creation itself, and too large to be destroyed.

One petal falls. Just one, golden and shining in the dark, before a black hole tugs it one way and a comet tugs it another. The flower would travel forward unencumbered, but this is one single petal. With a burst of light, it shreds, splitting in half, and the halves go their separate ways.

Even so, it is not truly broken, not truly separated, not truly lost. Each half still remembers, for they are just two parts of the same soul.

It just takes a while to find their way back together again.

Will opens his eyes to sunlight and warm dirt and Hannibal hovering above him. His hair is burnt, his skin is seared, and his eyes are red, too red, like he had stared into the heart of the star and come away with a flame of his own burning inside.

Will imagines he doesn't look much better than Hannibal.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal says.

"We didn't die," Will says.

"Apparently not." Hannibal tries to touch Will's hair, except it too is burnt and falls away in clumps. Hannibal clicks his tongue. "At least your eyes remain the same."

“What color?”

“Blue,” Hannibal says. “Like the deepest sea.”

“The seas and the stars,” Will muses. “Never touching, but always reaching out.”

“I am touching you now.”

“Yes,” Will says, winding their fingers together. There’s a faint golden haze there, but perhaps that is just the afterimage of the supernova that has bound them together forever. Either way, Will doesn’t care. “Yes, you are.”

Living life in a linear is weird, Will decides. Other people might call it normal, but Will has spent his entire life bouncing between time and space, and for him the strangest sensation of all is going to sleep in one bed and actually waking up in the same one come morning.

Of course, there is always one constant: the same constant there always is. Hannibal, who even in sleep cuts an imposing, elegant figure, who patiently guides him through the wondrous and at times boring bureaucracy of living day by day instead of century by century, who never falters or hesitates or blinks.

It takes Will only three days of awakening beside him to realize the words he has never told this Hannibal. The same words he had once screamed into the void of the future and carved into stone with bloodied fingers in the past, he now simply settles his mouth by Hannibal’s ear and whispers.

“I love you,” he says, and he isn’t sure which of the hundreds of thousands of languages he’s learned that he speaks it in, but the reaction is the same: Hannibal’s face, wide and open and shocked as the time Will had freed him from slavery, and it is just as lovely as the first time Will remembers seeing it.

Hannibal kisses him and Will kisses Hannibal, and together, they start a new life.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: One final look. Or perhaps, how it all began.

Someone made art of the "then we die together" moment!!! Huge thanks and appreciation to BCrushed for their lovely art that you can see HERE.

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will Graham is born amidst an evacuation. The ship is falling to pieces around them as fire burns their world to pieces, but the baby refuses to wait; he comes into life even as death claims a thousand souls around him.

Still, for all that he has fought to emerge, he utters not one single cry.

Almost all of the doctors are already busy tending to other patients. Only one heeds their call, an old stooped man with shaking hands and eyes shielded behind thick glasses. He touches the baby with gentle hands, prodding and poking and patting, and still the baby refuses to cry.

“One moment,” he tells the frantic parents, and walks a slow path into the tiny supply closet.

The baby has blue eyes, clear and deep as the sea, and although he makes no sound, the mere sight of his eyes tears a sound from deep within the doctor’s throat.

“My beloved,” he says. “I thought I might never see you again. And here we are, with you just starting out and me at the end. What a pair we make. Still. Even now, at the end, I will always be here for you.”

The doctor brings the baby back after a short while; he screams angrily when the doctor places him gently back in his mother’s arms.

“Don’t worry, he’s just expressing himself,” the doctor laughs.

“He’s bleeding.”

“Just a little blood transfusion,” the doctor explains. He touches one tiny fist, smiling when the baby immediately wraps demanding fingers around him. “We have no vaccines onboard, and he has a long life ahead of him; this will give him the best chance at survival. Please do take care of him.”

“We will,” his parents promise.

“Good-bye, little Will,” the doctor says, and then he slowly trudges away, hands shaking.

When his parents go looking for the doctor who coaxed sounds from their child’s throat, eager to thank him, they find nothing but the doctor’s coat and a handful of golden stardust.

Hannibal Lecter is born amidst a war. Death and destruction cover every path his parents flee in, and so when the time comes, the babe is born in a tiny hut in a swamp with only a wizened old man as a witness.

“He is strong,” the man says. “What will you name him?”

His parents shrug. Names are the first tragedies of war and destruction; all that remains are swords and fists and blood when family turns against family and the apocalypse rains down ash and death. Survival comes first. What does it matter what you are called when you might not live to the next sunrise?

“Fair enough,” the man says. “Let’s just make sure he does live to the next sunrise, all right? I don’t have much, but you are welcome to stay here.”

His parents accept. While they sleep, the man cradles the child close.

He has eyes like the flames of a star, and the man cries tears of joy and sadness both. “Of course you would come now,” the man whispers. “When the world is burning around me and my time is short, so short. I hope you will have a brighter future than I did, my beloved. I hope I find a way. I hope *we* find a way.”

He will give the child a blood transfusion, the man tells the parents. Just a little blood, so that he might live with all the protection garnered over a long life. The parents agree.

In the morning, they wake to an empty hut and the squalling of an angry baby. He is swaddled in the blanket the man had been using as a bed sheet, and all around him sparkles golden stardust.

At first there is nothing, and then there is a golden flower. Its petals are made of solar flares and its seeds of stardust. It tumbles through space, gleaming and glittering as it flies along the path of an ancient dance, bypassing stars and black holes as easily as past and future.

One day, a supernova knocks it off course. Just a little: this flower is older than creation itself, and too large to be destroyed.

One petal falls, though. Just one.

Just one, golden and shining in the dark, before a black hole tugs it one way and a comet tugs it another. With a burst of light, it shreds, splitting in half, and the halves go their separate ways.

The halves go spinning through time and space, always so close but never quite touching, but the flower is not worried. Even separated and broken and lost, they are never alone; they are still one where it matters most, and it just takes a little while for them to find their way back together again.

My beautiful children, says the flower. *My first and my last. Your road will be harsh and long and painful, but one day you will stand before me again as one mind, one heart, one soul. That day, we will welcome you home.*

FINIS

Chapter End Notes

1) All my thanks and love again to the MHBB mods, my friends, and my artist! You are all wonderful *hugs and kisses*

2) One day I might be able to keep a simple prompt from ballooning into a monster fic. . . Today is not that day! Also Doctor Who references. Lots of Doctor Who.

3) All typos and continuity errors are mine. This fic was written entirely by me going "wheeeeee" and gleefully putting words to text, no outlining or planning involved.

Thank you for reading my fic!

End Notes

Find me @ Telegram as TheSilverQueen : Tumblr as thesilverqueenlady : Twitter as silverqueenlady : NewTumbl as thesilverqueen : Dreamwidth as thesilverqueenlady

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